



藤崎都

小説

中村春菊

原作&
まんが

吉野千秋の場合2

世界一初恋

セカイイチハツコイ

角川ルビー文庫

Sekaiichi Hatsukoi: Yoshino

Chiaki no Baai (VOL.2)

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- THIS IS A NON-PROFIT TRANSLATION -

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「CHAPTER 1」

“Argh...I thought I was gonna die...”

Yoshino Chiaki collapsed on the sofa after sending home his assistants who had stayed with him until he had finally finished his current manuscript about an hour ago. As usual, the only person who stayed behind was Yanase Yuu, his chief assistant and friend from middle school.

“Chiaki, if you're gonna sleep, do it on the bed,” Yanase said as he cleaned up the screen tones and art material which were scattered all over the place. Instead of Yoshino, useless as he was, Yanase cleaned today as well. Surely, even Yanase was tired from staying up all night.

And I'm just useless.....

Although he promised that he wouldn't do this anymore, he had once again cut it close to the deadline. Ever since he was young, Yoshino developed an interest in drawing comics. When he was in university, he had made his debut as a shoujo manga artist by the pen name Yoshikawa Chiharu and had always completed his manuscripts days before the deadline. Now that he was twenty-eight years old, defying the deadline was typical. Back then, Yoshino's main focus had been writing one-shots, so his schedule had been more laid back. But now, just because he had gotten busy did not mean that he had to be a nuisance for people.

He didn't mean to take all the credit and gain the label for popularity. He meant to be serious every time but broke his pace somewhere along the way, so before he knew it, he ended up cutting it close to the deadlines.

Haven't I had enough of stress?

Yoshino was definitely not as much of a risk taker anymore compared to when he had first debuted, but even then, he had always felt the pressure to not disappoint his readers, which had accumulated over the years. Additionally, he wanted to make his works better and better, but the pace of his work did not improve. It has always been that he did not want to make compromises in his work and always stuck to his own ideas to the very end, but his childhood friend and editor-in-charge, Hatori Yoshiyuki, always lectured him by saying, “It's one thing to make a compromise but another thing to

carefully assess your own work”. But even though Yoshino acknowledged that, he could not look at his own work objectively when he was being attacked like that. The reason his work got delayed was because of this vicious cycle that he caught up in.

This time, because of Yanase's suggestion, he had sent each completed sheet of the manuscript through the motorbike delivery service, which forced the motorbike delivery people to come back to Yoshino's place multiple amount of times. By doing this, Yoshino somehow finished the manuscript. But after all this, only a single e-mail was sent by Hatori, which said “I received everything.” After that, no more messages came.

Even though he hadn't heard from Hatori, he assumed that the manuscript had been approved; yet it was clear that Hatori was angry. Now the scariest part was waiting for Hatori to contact him.

I know he's gonna lecture me anyway, so he should just hurry up and contact me.

He was not too keen on calling Hatori himself and disturbing him at his work, therefore, there was nothing he could do except wait. As he lay there exhausted and all his undue attention was being aimed at his cellphone, he heard the scribbling sound of a pencil. He casually raised his head and saw Yanase, who wore glasses when he worked as his assistant, with a sketchpad. He was sketching him.

“Are you drawing me again...?”

Ever since middle school, Yanase often drew Yoshino. Not only did he draw him during art class, but he also drew him in his notebook when Yoshino was sleeping during class and told Yoshino he'd draw him anytime as long as he was sitting down. During lunch breaks, Yoshino also happened to serve as his model.

Even though there were usually other guys to draw nearby, like Hatori, for some reason, Yanase had only drawn Yoshino back then. But Yoshino wasn't annoyed. However, there were men who were over twenty percent more better looking than himself available for Yanase to draw, so he completely did not understand Yanase's want to draw somebody as simple-looking as himself.

Yuu should draw himself instead.....

Hatori was quite a handsome man, but Yanase also had good-looking features, and even though he was a man, he was the type to fit the term “beautiful”. He had almond shaped eyes along with lightly color-dyed silky hair. Yanase's eyes were much better than

his own droopy eyes. They were rimmed with fluttering eyelashes.

“You're drawing me...Aren't you tired after today?”

“It's okay. I finished cleaning up.”

“Eh? Ah, you did.”

The hardwood floor, which had screen tones scattered all over the place until just a while ago, was now visible. Yanase must have tidied up the top of Yoshino's messy desk as well. But that wasn't all – just now Yanase had also done all of Yoshino's laundry, which had piled up during the crunch time. Yoshino could not thank Yanase enough for this.

“Geez! You're really an amazing guy.....! I want you to be my wife, seriously!” he said dramatically, but he truly felt grateful.

“I don't want to be your wife, but being your husband would be okay.”

Although Yanase replied to Yoshino's joke with a straight face, he did not stop sketching.

“Whaaat? Ahahahaha...hahaha...ah!”

As Yoshino laughed, his stomach gurgled. He hadn't paid attention to his hunger, because he had been concentrating on drawing, but now that he thought about it, he hadn't eaten anything since morning.

It was way past noon already. That's why it wasn't a strange time for his body to be complaining. The fact that he was dizzy and his fingers shook was proof that he was lacking sugar.

“Man, I'm hungry...Is there anything in the fridge?”

It seemed like he would faint if he didn't consume calories soon. Truthfully, he wanted to eat a proper dinner, but he did not have the energy to make anything right now, and honestly, his homemade cooking was not very good. He felt like Yanase would make him something if he asked him to, but perhaps because of their different sense of taste, Yanase's cooking was a bit bland for Yoshino, and when he added soy sauce or some other sauce to the food, Yanase scolded him by saying, “That's not the way to eat that!” and made Yoshino feel bad.

I must have some jelly drinks left...

He wasn't sure whether they were cold enough or not since he chilled these

energy drinks, which he bought in bulk in case of emergencies, but as he had expected, he felt dizzy with fatigue and bumped his shin on the coffee table.

“Ouch.....woa- woah!”

“Hey, watch out.....!”

Just as he was about to fall, Yanase immediately got up from his seat and caught him. Both of them let out a sigh of relief at the fact that they had avoided an accident.

“Haa...Geez, be careful, okay? What would you do if I hadn't caught you from falling?”

“Sorry, sorry! I'm really hungry, so my legs gave out.”

There was something funny about his walking like a drunkard like this. Even though he was not drunk, for the first time he now knew what it must feel like. It was wrong to have Yanase support him up forever, so Yoshino tried to stand on his own, but at that very moment, he felt Yanase press against his hips and back. It tickled him, so he grew weak.

“Hold on- what are you doing?”

“Hey, are you eating properly? You've lost weight, haven't you?”

Yoshino tilted his head at Yanase's question. He hadn't weighed himself recently, but his life style hadn't changed. Although, lately, he has been eating more fish than meat. But then again, at the end of crunch time, he always easily lost weight.

“You think? I don't think I changed much.”

“No. You've gotten lighter.”

His feet left the ground as Yanase lifted him up.

“Wah! What are you doing, Yuu!?”

“I'm just trying to see. I couldn't lift you so easily before.”

“Really? Well, you probably just gained some muscles, right, Yuu?”

“That's not it. Eat decent food, even when Hatori doesn't come over. Don't settle for convenience store food or take-out; cook your own! Rice is the staple food for the Japanese.”

As Yuu talked, he slowly lowered Yoshino, who he had been holding in his arms.

“I like rice, but cooking it is a pain.”

“There's a rice cooker for that. You're so lazy! That's why got such a skinny

waist.”

“Hya! Idiot, don't grab me by the waist...! Ahaha! Stop! That's...my weak spot...!!”

Yanase held him from behind and tickled his waist without mercy. Yoshino was a ticklish guy, so he was helpless to this.

“If you let me draw you naked right now, I'll stop. “

“Kya! You pervert! Ahaha, I'm seriously gonna die laughing! Hyahahahaha!”

“It doesn't matter, does it? I drew you before, so at least take off your shirt.”

“Ehh...hahaha, what should I do..?”

As they joked around in this strange awkward atmosphere after an all-nighter, the door suddenly opened with a click. Yoshino turned towards the sound and froze because of the person who was standing there.

“.....Ah...”

“.....”

“.....”

Hatori silently stood by the door with an angry expression on his face. His eyes were glazed, and it looked like his veins were about to burst from his forehead.

Uh-oh.....

Yoshino had broken the deadline due to terrible circumstances, and now he felt guilty for joking around after being such a nuisance for everyone. But for some reason he also had a hunch that hugging Yanase like this was not good and he got cold sweat over this thought. Hatori ignored the fact that they were frozen together, threw down the supermarket bag full of groceries and the envelope that contained the upcoming work material on Yoshino's desk, and without saying a word left quickly. They heard the sound of the door violently slamming shut and were left with only an eerie silence.

“Well, of course he's angry,” Yuu separated himself from Yoshino and patted him on the shoulder to cheer him up.

“Wha- what should I do...?”

Hatori being angry meant that he would not be able to eat Hatori's cooking for a while. Crunch time was finally over, but now he couldn't even eat any decent food like he usually would!



Besides, what was he supposed to do with so many groceries? Yoshino couldn't filet an entire fish, never mind the meat.

But the food is not the only problem.....

He was used to being lectured, but now, he was being ignored, and this made him uneasy. Clearly, he had been a nuisance because of how terrible his progress in drawing the extra comic had been this time. Now, all Yoshino was left with were horrible fantasies of whether Hatori had abandoned him or not. When he grew pale with fear, Yanase spoke softly.

“Look at it this way, what if you apologized by e-mail? You always break the deadlines, so he'll probably come around eventually. When was he ever in a good mood after crunch time?”

“Yea- yeah... You're right...”

Yanase's consolation cheered him up a little, but he still felt slightly uneasy.

“Oh yeah. I've stopped tickling you, so now you have to pose nude for me like you promised.”

“Hah!? What!? Don't decide things on your own!”

Hatori was angry at him because of Yanase, so he did not appreciate Yanase getting into other people's business again.

I seriously have a bad feeling about this situation...

He was probably overly concerned about this, but to his surprise, this hunch of his would not leave his mind.

“If you want me to, I could make something out of this.”

“Eh? Are you sure?”

“Cause, I bet you have no idea what to do with it, right, Chiaki?” Yanase asked as he pointed at the packaged up flounder, and Yoshino nodded miserably.

“Yea- yeah.”

“Boiling it in soy sauce would be okay with you, right? I'll be over here doing that while you go wash the rice.”

“You want me cook too!?”

“Of course. I'm not gonna spoil you. I'm gonna teach you how to do some basic cooking.”

“Ugh...Let's do it then...”

Yoshino's attitude wasn't because he was depressed about the task laid out in front of him. His ill omen came true; only this time, it did not resolve so simply.

「CHAPTER 2」

“ ‘Sorry about the other day!’ ...No, maybe ‘I’m terribly sorry about last time,’ is better? No...that sounds too unnatural too...,” Yoshino mumbled to himself as he walked towards Hatori’s apartment complex. His muttering was him practicing his apology. After Hatori had angrily left a few days ago, Yoshino had taken Yanase’s advice and sent Hatori an e-mail, saying “Sorry for all the trouble”. But one week had passed and still he received no reply from Hatori.

Hatori was probably just busy with work, but this was the first time that he had not contacted Yoshino, and Yoshino was somewhat restless. Usually Hatori was the first one to give in and apologize, but this time, Yoshino decided it would be better to go to Hatori’s apartment complex and apologize himself as well as bring a present.

“Aah...well, here I am.....”

He had stalled for time and had gone to the shopping center at the train station to buy an apology gift, but Hatori lived in the neighborhood, so it was inevitable that he arrived here quickly.

When he looked up the building, he saw that the light in Hatori’s room was turned on. He gulped, prepared himself, and stepped inside the apartment complex.

“...Alright, let’s do this.”

He took a deep, nervous breath and pressed the intercom button. He heard that the buzzer had gone off inside the room, but there was no answer. He pressed it again, but still got no answer. He had a spare key to this room, but thinking that Hatori was home today, he hadn’t brought it with him, so he couldn’t open it up for himself. From the outside, he had seen that the light was on, so Hatori had to be home. When he realized that Hatori was pretending to not be home, he got somewhat angry.

“Hey! I know you’re in there! Don’t ignore me on purpose!”

He pounded on the door, even though he wasn’t supposed to be the angry person. Then the front door finally opened, and he heard a low voice come out from inside.

“You’re disturbing the neighbors.”

“Then you should hurry up and open the door.”

“.....”

Yoshino retorted and Hatori's way of responding to him was to just look at him in silence. Then he went back inside the room, still in his silence.

Wha- what the hell...

In this awkward atmosphere, Yoshino went in after him. If he was going to apologize he should do it soon. Thinking this, he mumbled as he stared at Hatori's back.

“...Sorry. You said to do it right this time, but I broke the deadline again...I caused you trouble, too...”

“I'm not angry that you broke the deadline. That happens all the time.”

The casual way Hatori said this, ticked Yoshino off and he raised his voice.

“Wha-! Not *all* the time! One-third of the time at most!”

“*Half* the time at least. Should I remind you how often it had happened this year?”

“Ugh-!”

He could not argue with Hatori, who had begun to flip through a notebook. He had no excuse to make if Hatori presented the amount of times this has happened with actual numbers.

Well, I always knew it was bad, but...

But this did not mean that he could very well give up! Yoshino put the past in the past, returned back to the original problem, and began talking again.

“The- then, what *are* you so angry about?”

“.....”

After Hatori stared at Yoshino's face, he gave out a long sigh.

“What's with that look on your face!?”

Yoshino got angry at feeling like he was being ridiculed, and then Hatori reluctantly gave the reason for why he was annoyed.

“...I'm annoyed that Yanase was clinging on to you.”

“Ha?”

“Don't let any other guy besides me touch you. Especially not him.”

But Yoshino questioningly asked Hatori, who had said this sounding annoyed.

“Yuu is my friend. Why do you hate him so much?”

Then Hatori furrowed his brow even more and gazed at Yoshino with a look like he was looking at something unbelievable.

“*Why?* You really don't know?”

“It's not like I don't know, but...oh, I see! Tsk, you're just too narrow-minded!”

He somewhat understood what Hatori wanted to say. Hatori was perhaps the type that did not want anyone else touching the person whom he liked. That was probably what it was. But it was still ridiculous of him to butt into his business when the person who had touched him was his close friend and not someone else with another plan up their sleeve.

“Narrow minded...?”

“Yeah! You should follow Yuu's example...OW!?”

To Yoshino's surprise, Hatori threw him on the bed and leaned on top of him.

“Wha- what did you do that for!?”

“Isn't it obvious this means I want to do it with you on this bed?” Hatori calmly told him as he proceeded to remove Yoshino's clothing. Yoshino desperately held the hem of his shirt down giving Hatori a chance to remove Yoshino's pants instead.

“Hey! Cut the crap...! Stop.. stop it!!”

“I'll stop if you listen to what I have to say.”

“I don't understand what you're saying! Wah! Hey!”

Hatori pulled down Yoshino's underwear, ending this struggle. When Hatori touched his naked lower half of the body, Yoshino's heart rate suddenly quickened.

“This place is begging for release. Or, do you release it out yourself?”

“Wha- what are you saying!? Ngh...!”

Yoshino gasped for breath as Hatori held and massaged his cock. Hatori was right. It had been a while, so his body was simply reacting to get rid of the built up tension.

“Haa...! Ahh...No...! No...”

Since he had been abstaining from it up till now, he figured it was better to get it over with. But now, for some reason, he felt like it was more than just to release his built up tension. His desire was stronger than before. He was not used to this lover-like atmosphere of being face to face, so perhaps this was furthering his frustration. Or maybe his feelings had changed because he was about to have sex.

“...Urgh!? I said no...!”

His excitement increased in his core when he felt the sensation of being licked. It interrupted his thoughts. When he raised his head, letting out a cry, Hatori spoke with a cool expression on his face as he continued to run his tongue over Yoshino.

“Looks like you can afford to think about something else, huh?”

“No.....Ah...hh...Aahh...!”

Hatori massaged Yoshino's erection while carefully licking the underside. In no time at all, Yoshino's already stiff cock began to drip. Although he had several blowjobs done to him before, he still disliked them. Having someone lick this sensitive part of him sent his mind boiling with shame and intense ecstasy.

“Ah! ...Tori, no! Please.....!”

“If I stop now, you'll be in trouble, so just be quiet,” Hatori replied to Yoshino's weak plea and continued to hold the tip of Yoshino's member, which was dripping wet with semen, in his mouth. Hatori tightened around Yoshino's sticky, warm cock, causing Yoshino to arch his back from shock.

“Noo...! Ah, aahh!”

With the tip of his tongue, Hatori scooped at the tiny hole at the tip of Yoshino's cock while rubbing that area with his bottom lip as he held it tightly in his mouth. This influx of excitement dissolved Yoshino's reasoning.

Oh, crap, it feels so good I'm gonna die.....

The sound of his shallow breathing mixed in with the wet sounds and resonated around the room. Immediately, he couldn't fight against it, all he could do was gasp. His mind grew clouded at such intense pleasure, and the voice escaping from his throat sounded so flirtatious that it did not seem like his own.

“Haa! Aah...ah...no...I'm coming...! Let go...”

Not knowing what else to do, Yoshino tried to push Hatori's head away, but it took too much effort to do seeing that his arms were weak and all. Hatori kept sucking Yoshino's cock until he climaxed.

“Don't...ah! Aah...ngh...! Ngh...!”

Arms and legs trembling, Yoshino released his desire. Hatori took all of it up in his mouth and calmly swallowed.



Instead of being shocked at the fact that he was just forced to ejaculate, Yoshino was lost in the after mass of the climax.

I'm hopeless.....I'm so sleepy.....

He was exhausted, because he was lacking sleep from the nights before. Obviously weak and unable to fight against the strong wave of drowsiness taking over him, Yoshino was losing consciousness. Last night he had barely slept because he had been working hard to complete the upcoming storyboard.

“Yoshino?”

“Sorry.....I'm so...sleepy.....”

“Sleepy!? Hey, Yoshino!?”

Even the sound of Hatori calling him sounded so distant. Then, Yoshino completely blacked out.

* * * *

Yoshino's eyes snapped open at the same time he hit the alarm clock to silence the beep-beep-beeping.

“Ahh...I slept well...,” Yoshino sat up and stretched on the bed.

The time on his wristwatch indicated ten o'clock. He felt strangely refreshed, perhaps because he had slept really well. He casually looked around and tilted his head to one side.

“Huh? What am I doing at Tori's place?”

Yoshino had thought that he was at his own place, but he had slept in Hatori's bed instead. No wonder the sun was hitting the futon, and the bed sheets felt freshly washed too.

“Well then...”

“Woke up?”

When he finally remembered what had happened last night, Hatori came into the bedroom. He was looking more displeased than yesterday.

“Oh.”

He looked at the frown on Hatori's face, and the events from last night clearly

came back to him. Yoshino had fallen asleep after he had ejaculated. He had been forced to receive oral sex.

That must have been awkward...

Hatori was not pleased that he had been put in the waiting phase. Although Yoshino had been forced into this situation for the most part, being a man himself, he knew how awful it was to be in the waiting phase, and he felt guilty that only he was the only one feeling refreshed.

As he wondered what had followed after, Hatori coldly spoke up.

“I made breakfast, so go eat.”

“O- okay.”

Wanting to see how the situation will play out, he decided to eat first. When he got to the table after washing his face, he saw a solid, Japanese style breakfast laid out before him: miso soup with white rice, omelet, and grilled fish. There was also a salad full of fresh vegetables along with a reduced sugar yogurt for desert. The moment he looked at all that, Yoshino's stomach grumbled from hunger. Last night, his head had been full of ways to apologize to Hatori so he hadn't eaten anything. Giving his body what it needed, Yoshino said his thanks at the same time he began eating the side dishes.

It's been a while since I had Tori's cooking. It's just as good as always.

His feelings of nervousness disappeared as he happily ate and forgot the awkwardness between them. Before he knew it, he finished the main course, and then reached for the yogurt desert. As he peeled back the aluminum lid, he remembered what he wanted to tell Hatori.

“Oh yeah. I'm going to the hot springs with Yuu this Wednesday and Thursday.”

“What? I didn't hear of this,” Hatori stopped eating, his chopsticks in mid air when Yoshino suddenly announced this.

“I didn't have time to tell you. I wanted to invite you too, but me and Yuu can't go on the weekends, so the two of us are gonna go.”

Yoshino could make it work on the weekends, but Yanase could not because of his other jobs working as an assistant. Yoshino had been persuaded that it was better go on a day when Yuu was free, so he gave up on inviting Hatori this time.

“.....”

“I’ll bring back a souvenir and definitely finish the storyboard before I go on the trip. Speaking of that, I brought it with me yesterday. I stayed up all night to finish it.”

Because of that, he had fallen asleep yesterday before Hatori. He wanted Hatori to forgive him for last time, so that's why he had made such progress in his work. Yoshino took out the folder – which contained the copy of the storyboard – from his bag that sat on the chair.

“If you have some time right now, do you think you can check this over for me? I want to get it over with.”

“So...you do know what day that is. The day you're going to go,” Hatori asked quietly, making Yoshino crook his head.

“Huh? There's something going on that day? Oh, the supplementary illustration piece is due, isn't it? I finished the rough draft for that as well, so I can bring it over tomorrow,” Yoshino said, proud that there was no problem when it came to that issue, but Hatori put down his chopsticks, dismissing the fact that there were still side dishes left. Hatori suddenly got up and began clearing away both of their plates as he spoke.

“...I'll look at the storyboard later. I'm busy today. If you're done eating then hurry up and leave,” he said and went to the kitchen with a stack of plates in his hands.

“Huh...?”

Yoshino didn't understand the reason behind Hatori's attitude and was taken aback by it. Yoshino had taken everything that he could into consideration, but for some reason, Hatori's bad mood had gotten worse.

He's acting really rude! Sulking and giving me the cold shoulder!

Thinking this, Yoshino's anger rose.

“What the hell is up with your attitude!? A person tries really hard like this, and you don't even have anything to say!?”

“.....”

“Say something!”

Yoshino was enraged, but Hatori continued to ignore him and washed the dishes in silence. Yoshino could not put up with Hatori anymore.

“Damn you! You jerk!”

Yoshino threw the folder with the storyboard on the table and left Hatori's place,

saying something he would have said if they were still kids who were having a fight.

Pissed off, Yoshino left the apartment building, but then suddenly stopped in his tracks and looked back.

“...I knew it. He's not gonna come after me...”

Hatori's feelings were unclear to him, and this made him feel unusually helpless.

「CHAPTER 3」

I wonder what he's been up to these days...?

It was close to sundown, so he was probably working in the editorial department like usual. Or perhaps he had left to meet up with another author? Yoshino was in his and Yanase's room. He was enjoying dinner, which had been prepared for Yanase and him while they had been sight seeing and had only now just returned to the hot springs resort after quickly switching trains. However, no matter what beautiful sights he had seen or what delicious foods he had eaten, Yoshino could only think of Hatori.

I want to eat Hatori's hamburgers...

The dinner, made with all local ingredients, was so delicious that one could not complain, but right now, he really missed Hatori's cooking.

“This was more delicious than I thought it'd be.”

“Ye- yeah. You're right.”

Yoshino came back to reality about the same time he had finished gulping down his dinner.

Stop thinking about that stuck-up guy!

He had come here to relax, so it was silly to trouble himself by thinking about unnecessary things. He didn't get to do these kinds of things too often, so he should just enjoy it. As he kept telling himself this, for some reason, a cake was brought to his table.

“This is a Japanese style hotel, but they bring cake for dessert?”

Although it was a small cake, it was a whole one. Yoshino wondered what was going on, as he looked down at the cake with a nameplate that read “Happy Birthday”.

“Happy Birthday. I hear that today is your birthday, and on your birthday, this hotel offers this kind of small gifts,” said the hostess who had brought the cake and set down fruit champagne as well.

Oh yeah...today is my birthday...

Yoshino completely had not kept up with the date, because he had such a disorganized lifestyle, but it seemed like Yanase had remembered that it was his birthday today.

“I had this prepared in secret. I bet you're surprised. Of course, there's no amount

of candles for your age, so I just had them put this nameplate instead.”

Before coming to appreciate how Yanase had prepared all this for him, Yoshino remembered the conversation he had with Hatori.

‘So...you do know what day that is. The day you're going to go?’ Hatori had said, and he had been probably referring to Yoshino's birthday. Since Hatori had brought it up, he must have prepared something for Yoshino's birthday as well.

This is my first birthday since we started dating...

Come to think of it, every year, Hatori had given him something for his birthday. If Yoshino mentioned that he was looking for out-of-print comics, Hatori would buy them for him from a used bookshop, and if he complained of running out of drawing supplies, Hatori brought him that to stock-up on. Although these presents weren't romantic, each one of them always had a lot of thought put into it. Back then, he didn't really think too much about it and was happy to just go along with whatever Hatori had told him, which was usually “I just happened to find it” or “I'm your editor, so I need to do this”, but now that he thought about it, that had only been Hatori's arrogance talking. There was no way that Hatori could simply find the book that Yoshino, himself, had such a hard time finding and gathering the necessary drawing supplies was not easy either! Even when he asked Hatori to bring him material which he knew was not easy to come by, Hatori brought it for him with much indifference in most cases, but he never once said anything about how hard it was to obtain. And despite all this, what had he, Yoshino, done for Hatori?

Sure, there were times when he treated Hatori to fast food back when they were students, but ever since he had become a manga artist, he was always busy chasing deadlines, and Hatori's birthday was not something he kept track of.

What's there to like in someone as inconsiderate as me...?

He reasoned. His actions were inconsiderate or even somewhat rude. If he apologized to Hatori, he would only be doing so to save his own conscience. He bit his lip at that thought.

“You're bored if Hatori is not around, huh?”

“Eh...?”

Yanase's sudden question startled him.

“You're thinking ‘I wish he were here’, aren't you, Chiaki?”

“What are you talking about!? Of course not! I'm actually glad that he's NOT here. If he were here with us, I bet he would lecture me again. I swear, that guy is always on my back. It's so annoying!”

His new relationship with Hatori was still a secret to Yanase, so he quickly covered it up by disagreeing with Yanase and bad-mouthing Hatori. Hearing this, Yanase gave Yoshino an uncertain smile and said: “Well, that's his job, I guess.”

“Ye- yeah, that's why I don't want to see him on my day off as well!” he laughed, letting this slip. Yanase probably wasn't thinking too deeply about it when he had asked that question, because he didn't ask Yoshino any further.

I'm nervous...

Sometimes he was worried that Yanase could see right through him. He was often very nervous, especially when he was hiding something. Yanase stared at Yoshino, but then suddenly his expression changed, and he said, “How about we go to the hot springs after you're done eating? I hear it gives you a good shoulder massage.”

“O- okay.”

“I don't like sweets, so you can have the whole cake. I'll have the champagne instead. You can't handle wine, anyway, right?”

Yanase said and reached for the cold champagne bottle, which had come as a gift.

* * * *

“Now that's how a bath should be!”

When they had returned to their room, Yoshino gulped down the fruit milk he had bought after the two of them had been to the public hot springs bath. Many vending machines were lined up in front of the changing room.

“You sure like that drink. That's your second one.”

“What's wrong with that? I couldn't decide if I wanted coffee milk or something else.”

“You're like a kid,” said Yanase, drinking a can of beer.

“Shut up. Wasn't the hot springs great, though? Let's go again tomorrow

morning.”

“If you can wake up early.”

The public hot springs bath was an outdoors one, and the mist rising from the hot water shone milky white in color. It was very beautiful. The temperature of the water was perfect, and because he sat at his desk too much he had stiff muscles, but after the bath he felt like they had considerably loosened up.

If only I had a massage today.

He sighed to himself. The massage specialist was completely booked today, so he could only schedule an appointment. Having no other choice, he made do with the electronic massage machine which was in the changing room, but that didn't satisfy him. As he told himself that he will go to his personal chiropractor after he got back, Yanase, who had finished off his beer, suddenly said, “Oh yeah. You said you'd let me draw you nude. So let me draw you now.”

“What are you saying, you idiot. Besides, I never said that!”

He was definitely not going to get walked over. He thought Yanase had stopped with that joke already. Yoshino argued with him, but didn't succeed.

“Don't be so stubborn.”

“You're drunk, aren't you?”

It was rare for him to not know whether Yanase was serious or not. He felt like Yanase was slightly drunk from drinking two cans of beer after the bath and the champagne before the bath.

“I wouldn't say I'm drunk.”

“...Besides, you don't have your drawing supplies.”

Was he so drunk that he couldn't even tell he was drunk? Yanase smugly searched through his bag when Yoshino pointed this out to him with a sigh. Then he pulled out a small sketchpad and a pen case.

“I brought it with me. I make sure to bring this when I travel.”

“What!?”

“I draw scenery, cats, and stuff like that. I use this like a camera. Anyway, get undressed.”

“I'm not getting naked!”

So Yanase was serious.

"I'm not exactly telling you to take off your underwear. You know, it would be nice if you did things I asked you every once in a while," Yanase said. It was hard for Yoshino to refuse, seeing that Yanase always did things for him. After hesitating, Yoshino made a proposal.

"Fine.....but only my upper body."

"Okay, that's fine."

He reluctantly pulled out his arms from the sleeves of his yukata. When they were at the hot springs together, he hadn't been embarrassed, but the moment Yanase said he was going to draw him, he felt self-conscious.

"Sit over there, then."

"O- okay."

Yoshino sat cross-legged on the chair, which stood on the wooden veranda, and looked at Yanase with a mixed expression wondering why he always kept drawing him.

"I don't exactly look very fun to draw, but you still draw me so much. Isn't it boring? You can make an art portfolio out of me, I bet."

"It's not boring. I love you, Chiaki."

"Huh!?" Yoshino looked at him in shock when he heard such an absurd thing all of a sudden. But unlike Yoshino, Yanase was not perturbed and continued drawing; his expression unchanged.

"I love your bone structure."

Yoshino's fast heartbeat slowed down a little.

Oh I see. He just likes me to be his model.

"Oh, yeah, yeah. Of course, my bones. Hahaha..."

Heart still trembling, he hid his nervousness by laughing it off. But Yanase looked up from his sketch book, and egged on Yoshino's nervousness even further by saying,

"Yeah, your bones as well."

"So wait, are you actually saying that you love me?" he asked jokingly, but Yanase just stared at him silently.

Wha- what's with this atmosphere!?

Having a bad feeling about this, Yoshino slowly put his yukata back on.

“I- I'm thirsty. I'm gonna go buy something to drink. Do you want something to drink too, Yuu?”

“You just drank milk. Stay still for a bit,” Yuu said as he moved towards Yoshino. That very moment, Yoshino felt a chill. He sensed something strange, so he tried to get up from the chair, but Yanase grabbed the chair armrests and faced him, so he couldn't move.

“Wha- what!?”

“Before, you asked me if I liked anyone. Do you still want to know? I'll tell you, if you still do,” Yanase asked, dead serious, making Yoshino fluster even more.

I have to play it cool no matter what he says!

Intuitively, he knew that it was better not to know. But it would be strange to say that he didn't want to know now when he had been so curious about it before. Surely, Yanase's suggestive behavior was all an act, and he was only teasing Yoshino.

I'm just casually gonna ask, just casually.

He told himself, but just when he was about to open his mouth, his cellphone rang.

I- I'm saved! Thank god!

“The phone! I need to see who it is,” Yoshino blurted, shoving Yanase out of the way. When he answered the phone – it was Hatori was on the other end.

“It's me. Is now a good time?”

It's Tori of all people! God hates me.....

Yoshino was hating God right now, but replied casually.

“Yeah...it's fine. Oh wait, my signal is not very good. Hold on, I'm gonna go somewhere to try to make it better.”

After making up this excuse and making sure Yanase heard him, Yoshino covered up the cellphone mouthpiece, told Yanase “I'm gonna step out for a bit” and left the veranda to go into the courtyard. He wanted to be away from the awkward atmosphere in that room for a while.

He put on a pair of wooden clogs and clip-clopped across the stone steps. Only when he arrived at the gazebo, which stood at the far end of the courtyard, did he press his cellphone back to his ear.



“Hey, Yoshino? Are you really okay?”

“Ye- yeah. I'm okay. Um, is something up?” he asked, sounding forced because he was nervous.

“I wouldn't be calling you if nothing was up. I looked over the storyboard corrections. I don't think there are any problems with it for the most part. There are only one or two lines that I want you to fix, but you can continue on with it like it is. I sent you a fax of the corrections I made.”

“Got it. Oh, is the extra illustration alright?”

“Yeah, it's good.”

They mostly only talked about work, but he was still relieved that they could talk like usual. However, now Hatori grew silent. He was still on the line with Yoshino, but it was quiet on the other side of the line.

“Tori?”

Just when he wondered whether the connection broke, Hatori suddenly apologized without giving a reason first.

“I'm sorry.”

“About?”

Because Yoshino wasn't expecting it, he replied coldly. It's hard to properly show emotions over the phone. You can't let the person know what kind of facial expression you're making, and you don't know the other person's facial expression either.

Hatori seemed uneasy, probably still thinking that Yoshino was mad at him. After a brief pause, he added, “.....Sorry I behaved so childishly the other day.”

“N- no, it's okay...”

He was going to add that he wasn't angry, but held his tongue. He certainly had been angry when he had left Hatori's house that day. But that had been because he didn't understand Hatori's feelings. Even now, he wouldn't say that he understood, but he did realize that he himself had been in the wrong.

I made Tori apologize before me again.....

No matter how you think of it, Yoshino was the one at fault. But Hatori did not mention anything of that sort. The truth was that he helped Yoshino even if it killed his high and mighty pride.

Why is he so nice to me?

Anyone would tell such an insensitive guy as him to get lost if they didn't know him very well.

“Are you still angry?”

“No, that's not it...”

There were many things he wanted to say and ask but couldn't put them into words. Since Yoshino was faltering, Hatori misinterpreted this as him being once again offended and ended the conversation.

“This is all I have to say. I'm sorry I disturbed you.”

“Ah, um...”

“Happy birthday, Yoshino,” Hatori congratulated him and then hung up.

“Wai-! Hey! Tori!?” he tried to yell to stop him, but the telephone connection was already broken.

Maybe the reason he called me was to tell me that...?

When he thought about it, it seemed to him that the storyboard conversation could have waited until tomorrow. Besides, he faxed the corrections to his house anyway, so there was no need to call him and tell him about it. He made this phone call seem like it was about work, but also threw in a happy birthday wish before the day ended.

“Damn it! I have to keep everything to myself!” Yoshino fret, all the while really wanting to see Hatori. Unable to stand it any longer, he returned to his room and began changing his clothes. Seeing Yoshino do this, Yanase shot him a questioning look.

“Yoshino? Did something happen?”

“Sorry, um, something came up. I have to go to my parent's house,” Yoshino gave a vague reason as he quickly packed his things into his bag. Even he knew that what he was doing was selfish, but he couldn't hold down this urge to go.

“Right now? Can't you go tomorrow morning?”

“No. I have to go now. Sorry I'm being so selfish. I'll make it up to you!”

With that, Yoshino dashed out of the hotel, leaving Yanase alone.

* * * *

He took a taxi from the hotel to the train station and somehow made it back to his hometown before the day was done. Yoshino's feet moved quickly on their own accord and before he knew it he was running. When he reached Hatori's place, he pressed the intercom button with force. Finally, he heard Hatori's voice, sounding suspicious, over the speaker.

“Yes? Who is this...?”

“Ah, um...it's me.”

“Yoshino!?” Hatori sounded surprised and then he heard a harsh rattling sound. It seemed like Hatori dropped the intercom receiver. After some more bustling noise from inside the room, the front door opened and Hatori appeared, wearing sweats and a t-shirt; probably already preparing for bed.

“What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be at the hot springs?” Hatori was looking at Yoshino like he couldn't believe what he was seeing and threw question after question at him.

“Yeah, well that's true, but I came back.”

“Did something happen!?”

It was true that something had happened, but if he told him about that incident with Yanase, he felt like things would get complicated, so he decided to keep quiet about it.

“N- no, that's not it. I just wanted to see your face.”

“...Huh?”

“Ah! I mean, I just wanted to get started on work! I mistook your place for my place!” he insisted in order to cover up that embarrassing thing he had accidentally blurted out. Unable to hide his flushed cheeks, Yoshino turned on his heel and was about to leave but Hatori immediately grabbed his hand and stopped him.

“Say again what you've said just now.”

“Whi- which part?”

There was no way he could say that again. As Yoshino pretended to play innocent, Hatori revised his question.

“Did you really want to see me?”

“Oh, did I say that!?”

Yoshino pretended he had forgotten what he had just said. If Hatori had continued questioning him further, he was going to go home no matter what it took, but Hatori did nothing of that sort.

“I understand. It's already late, so stay over the night. Work can wait until tomorrow, right?” Hatori gently insisted, and Yoshino obediently went inside, following him.

“...Okay.”

However, for some reason he felt very nervous, and the atmosphere felt tense, even though Hatori's place was something he could always call his second home considering how much time he spent there. He watched Hatori's back as he slowly took off his coat.

This is really awkward...

This realization lay heavy on his shoulders. Perhaps to break this atmosphere, Hatori called out to him sounding like his usual self.

“You were at the hot springs, right? Did you eat?”

“Ye- yeah. I ate and then went to the hot springs bath.”

“Just a beer then? I think I had some snacks somewhere.”

Muttering to himself, Hatori peered into the refrigerator as Yoshino gathered up his courage and said, “...Um!”

“Yeah?”

Hatori looked behind him, holding two cans of beer and cheese. He flinched when Hatori looked his way, but grit his teeth anyway.

“I forgot that today is my birthday...”

Hearing this, Hatori's eyes widened in surprise, but then he gave a small smile.

“Idiot, that's why you came back?”

“Do- don't call me an idiot! I know this is my fault... I'm sorry if you were planning for us to do something.”

“You don't need to apologize. Just you being here is enough.”

“.....!” Yoshino's heart skipped a beat when Hatori looked at him so lovingly.

Okay, why is my heart pounding now at someone I've known for over twenty years...!?

Yoshino's heart pounded. Meanwhile, Hatori placed the snacks and beer on the kitchen counter and took out a cardboard box from somewhere. Yoshino couldn't help but look at this random object.

“What's that?”

“A present. I didn't know what to get you, but I think something practical would be the best. I'm glad I can give this to you today,” Hatori said, holding out the cardboard box in front of him in both his hands. Yoshino didn't think he would prepare him a present, so he was touched. He took the box excitedly and found that it was very heavy.

“Thank you...it's a little heavy...”

Naturally, his curiosity grew at what inside could be so heavy?

I wonder what Tori is giving me?

Yoshino sat down on the sofa, peeled the packaging tape, opened the box lid, and looked inside. He looked questioningly at the contents.

“...What's this?”

“It's manuscript paper as you can see. With all these supplies you won't ever run out. Now you can draw as much as you want.”

“Hey! You thought I'd be happy with this? You're supposed to give a more romantic present on birthdays!”

Although he was happy that he received something practical, wasn't it kind of a cold present? Forgetting his manners, Yoshino complained, but Hatori asked him a question instead.

“What then?”

“I- I don't know, but definitely not this...”

He hadn't been thinking of what sort of thing would be considered romantic, when he had blurted that out.

Girls in my manga usually get some sort of accessory on their birthdays, but I'm not a girl.

This present set a practical mood. He couldn't come up with anything since nothing came to his mind. As Yoshino racked his brain, Hatori took Yoshino's hand and brought it to his mouth.

“T- Tori?”

All of a sudden, Hatori kissed the palm of his hand as he said something embarrassing: "Then I'll give you myself."

"...Wha- what you are saying!? You're embarrassing yourself by saying something like that!" Flustered, Yoshino's face turned red since this dialogue and situation were just like from a shoujo manga.

I seriously can't believe this. How can he say that with a straight face...?

He was fed up with himself for instantly becoming flustered when Hatori said something embarrassing so seriously, but Hatori let go off his hand.

"If you don't want me, that's fine too."

"Wh- who said anything about not wanting?" He coldly retorted to hide his embarrassment and grabbed Hatori's hand before he could pull it away.

Uwa, I just did something really embarrassing, didn't I?

He did not let go of Hatori's hand, his eyes shifting from side to side. He could not look Hatori in the eyes because of embarrassment.

"...Yoshino," Hatori lightly hit him on the forehead. From this distance, he felt Hatori's breath, and his heartbeat increased. Hatori gently freed his hand and grabbed the palm of Yoshino's hand. All Yoshino could feel was how sweaty his own hand was from being so nervous, but Hatori lifted Yoshino's chin with his other hand. The moment their eyes met, Hatori kissed him on the lips.

"...Mm...", Yoshino gasped when Hatori lightly bit his lower lip. As Yoshino's lips slightly parted, Hatori's tongue slipped in. He wasn't being rough in the least, and Yoshino began to relax. As they stood in this unnatural position, he wondered if he should wrap his hands around Hatori's back, but then Hatori broke the kiss apart and Yoshino felt like Hatori would think it funny if he did that.

"I can't resist today."

"Is- is that something to complain about!?"

"Well, no? Are you saying you also want to do it?"

"...Yea- yeah, so shut up already!"

"Ow..."

Yoshino hit Hatori on the head and then grabbed his head to make him stop blabbing. Hatori laughed for a while, but then suddenly stopped.



“To...ri...?”

Just when Yoshino was about to ask what was wrong, Hatori muttered, dissatisfied, “...You smell different.”

“Hm? That's because I used the hotel's shampoo.”

He had used the special shampoo and body soap when he was at the public bath, but he didn't think that it was such a big deal.

“Did you take a bath with him?”

“Eh? Well...it's a public bath so...Wha-!”

The moment he said that, Hatori grabbed the back of his neck and pushed him down on the sofa.

“What are you doing?”

“From now on, don't ever let any guy see you naked.” Hatori had an extremely scary face while looking down at him. Somehow, it didn't look like he was joking.

“That would mean I can never go to the hot springs!”

“Who cares about that? I was going to be gentle with you today, but now I won't.”

“Huh!?”

“This will be your punishment,” Hatori said and held both of Yoshino's hands together in one grasp above Yoshino's head.

“Wh- what do you mean when you say punishment...!?” Yoshino glared at Hatori for saying something like that so nonchalantly. He had no idea what Hatori was thinking, but he wanted him to release him because it hurt.

“If I tell you, that would take the fun out of it, right?”

“There's nothing fun about it! Mmph! Mmmph...!”

Hatori couldn't control himself so much that he kissed Yoshino like trying to eat him. He devoured poor Yoshino's lips, and when they pulled apart to breathe, he inserted his tongue inside Yoshino's mouth and licked all over. Having their tongues intertwined sent a sweet chill spreading all over Yoshino's body.

“Mmph...mm.....mmm.....!”

Lips still locked in a kiss, Hatori's hands traced the outline of Yoshino's body, from his waist down to his thighs and finally stopping at his warm groin.

“Mm! Mm...angh.....!”

He softly massaged the top of Yoshino's jeans, and Yoshino's lower abdomen began to feel hot. From this touch, the stiff jean material began to rise, and it started feeling cramped inside. But his mouth was being ravaged, so he couldn't protest. When he impatiently stirred, Hatori quickly undid the waistband. It was such a relief when Hatori lowered the zipper, but then his hand immediately went inside Yoshino's underwear. Hatori grabbed Yoshino's hot, throbbing genitals which began to harden as he moved his hand up and down.

“Nn.....ngh...mm.....!”

This stimulated Yoshino, and his hips slightly flinched. The wet feeling he felt was probably pre-cum. The feeling of Hatori's hand becoming wet with his pre-cum enticed Yoshino even more. Sometimes his lower half twitched, and he was aware of the heat growing inside him. It seemed as though his twitching and throbbing would keep growing.

“.....Haa...aa...aahh.....”

Hatori's lips left Yoshino's but he continued to fondle Yoshino's member; in fact, Hatori began fondling it more ferociously. Now that Yoshino's mouth was free, he let out a loud cry from deep within his throat.

He desperately tried to put up with it, but his body, numb with ecstasy, wouldn't listen. When he bent his neck back, Hatori planted a kiss on his neck, which stimulated Yoshino even more.

“Aah.....ah! Aahh...no more.....!”

Just when he was about to come, Hatori blocked it, forcibly stopping the urge.

“No...why.....!”

“I told you this was punishment, right? I'll let you come when you realize what you've done.”

“Huh!? Don't screw with.....Hya!”

Hatori grabbed the hand cream tube, which was sitting on the table, and skillfully opened the lid with one hand while his other hand held down Yoshino's palms. Then he rolled up Yoshino's shirt and squeezed out the cream onto Yoshino's abdomen.

While Yoshino swallowed back his breath that rose at the cool feeling of the cream, Hatori pulled down Yoshino's underwear and kicked it down. With that, he spread

open both of Yoshino's bare legs and smeared cream in-between them.

“Ngh...!”

“I actually want to say that you can't let anyone see you, but I will tolerate you going to the hot springs. But you can't let Yanase see you naked. Promise that you'll never go out with him anymore, where it's just the two of you alone...”

“.....Why...?Aah...!”

“Cause I'm jealous, okay? You draw romance, you should know this.”

“I should know this? Aah.....ah...aahh!”

He was going to glare at him, but Hatori shoved a cream smeared finger inside Yoshino causing him to bend his back, so this didn't happen. His lip quivered at the foreign sensation, which he still was not used to, but Hatori paid him no mind and pushed his finger further inside.

Why do I have to go through this.....?

He tried to remove Hatori's hands, but he had no power in his fingers.

“Let go.....Aah.....ngh.....!”

Hatori's finger curled inside his body. It pressed on his soft insides. Inadvertently, Yoshino let out an even louder cry than before. Hatori pulled his finger in and out; meanwhile, rubbing Yoshino's member and blocking his desire. Every time he thought he was going to climax, Hatori tightly blocked the tip, which only made Yoshino more impatient.

“It's simple. Just promise me this.”

“Noo.....! Please.....!”

“Hate it all you want. We can stay like this forever,” Hatori said, moving his finger faster in and out as his grip on Yoshino's genitals tightened. Before he knew it, Hatori put in another finger inside Yoshino, and the cream, which was melting from the body heat, caused an obscene noise.

“Aahh.....no...it hurts.....! Stop...!”

He felt like he was losing his mind from being unable to release his desire and the continuous ecstasy being stimulated on him. At the very least, he wanted to escape this pain right now.

“Then swear right now.”

“I swear...! I...promise...so.....!” He nodded, unable to think about anything. There were tears collecting in the corners of his eyes. A single tear escaped and slid down.

“Really?”

“Really...so...p-please...I want to come...!”

“Okay. I'll let you come as much as you want.”

No sooner did the hand release his genitals, were his legs suddenly pushed up high to his chest and something hot pressed on this stretched out opening. The moment his eyes widened with the realization of what that something was, Hatori deeply penetrated him.

“Ah.....aahh.....!”

As Hatori roughly inserted it in, Yoshino splashed milky-white substance on his abdomen. His pent up desire now burst out. His mind went blank and the shock of being penetrated and climaxing all at once made him see lights. However, Hatori mercilessly shook Yoshino's hips, which trembled sweetly with the effects of the climax.

“Noo.....! Aah...! Aahh.....!”

He could feel the overwhelming presence of Hatori's desire inside him as it stretched Yoshino's tight opening to it's limit. His soft insides convulsed when Hatori moved inside him causing the tightness to be even more terrible. The pain engraved into him, but pleasure exceeded that pain, and when Hatori moved their hips together, Yoshino let out lovely sighs. Although he had already climaxed just now, Hatori continued to move and Yoshino's desire again welled up in his inner core. He bent backwards and a drop of clear fluid dripped out. Hatori violently shook Yoshino, still deeply penetrating him, but did not touch the most sensitive spot as if on purpose. Yoshino thought to himself that he did not want it there, but it was hard for him to say what he wanted, so instead, he moved his hips on his own and tried to get the stimulus he was after.

“Ngh...uugu...ah! Aah...aahh...!”

“What's gotten into you? You're very forward today. You're moving your hips all on your own.”

“Aah...! Ca- cause...you're...!”

“I’m what? I’ll do anything if you just tell me how you want it.”

“.....!”

There was no way he could say that. He was feeling extremely scatterbrained, but he still had some reason left in him. It's not like it wasn't embarrassing to move on his own free will and try to get pleasure in his own way, but it was much better than having to say what he wanted.

“There's no need to be embarrassed by now, right? Your body is much more honest than you.”

“Aahh...! Aahhh...!”

Chuckling, Hatori let his hips go wild. Hatori bore right into the sensitive spot he had been purposefully avoiding before, and Yoshino couldn't resist anymore. His soft insides were considerably looser than when they had started, because of the continuous in and out motion, but even then, he tightened around Hatori. As Hatori roughly rummaged inside him, it seemed as if Yoshino's brain was turning into mush.

“Hya...! Aah...I'm...gonna come...again...!”

“It's fine. I told you I'll let you come as much as you want.”

“Ngh.....! Tori...together.....!”

Sex is meant for two people so there is no use in it if only one person feels good.

“Yeah, I'm almost at my limit, too.”

Hatori greatly increased his speed as soon as he said that. It was violent but somehow sweet. Why did he think that?

“Aahhh.....! Aahh...aah...ngh! Ngh...”

Yoshino tightly grabbed Hatori by the neck, feeling as though he was going to be thrown off because the motion was so vigorous. Yoshino breathed heavily, and Hatori planted a kiss on his lips. The passionate kiss and thrusts caused violent heat to rise within his body whether he wanted it to happen or not.

“Mmhh...mmh...ngh...! Ah! Ah! Aahh...aahhhh.....!”

In one instance, Hatori penetrated deep into Yoshino's inner most part, making Yoshino well up with heat from the shock. He tightened around the force, urging it to climax, and immediately after, he felt something hot inside his body. He breathed out deeply, his body thrown into violent spasms.



“.....Chiaki,” Hatori held him and repeatedly pecked him with soothing kisses, and to this, Yoshino slowly closed his eyes.

* * * *

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow...,” Yoshino hardly exercised, so his whole body was screaming because it wasn't used to such intense work-out. It especially hurt in his hips.

For quite some time now, Hatori was giving him a massage, but he felt like it was just a drop in the bucket.

“...Geez, you could've been more gentle, you know.”

When they were having sex, his mind was filled with ecstasy so it had felt good, but now that he had calmed down, the pain had hit.

“What are you talking about? I tried to stop, but you were the one who kept saying you wanted more.”

“Who said something like that!? Ow, ow, ow.....”

“You didn't say it in words, but I could tell you were saying that just by how tightly you were squeezing me. I won't let you say that you had no part in this even though you were crying and whining.”

“.....!” He had no counter-argument for that. Although his body strength gave out easily, he had been lusting for ecstasy, and whenever Hatori had tried to take it out, Yoshino had tightened around him and prevented him from leaving. At that time, he hadn't been thinking straight and had acted purely on instinct.

“I still kind of feel like it's my fault for putting you through this though, so that's why I'm giving you a massage. So quit complaining and quietly go to sleep.”

“.....”

He was very thankful for the massage. Hatori was putting just the right pressure into Yoshino's stiff muscles, and it felt very good.

Hatori only did this every once in a while, but the next day his muscles were no longer stiff and he felt like he was born again. As Hatori massaged near Yoshino's shoulder blades, he reminded Yoshino about the promise he made when they were doing it.

“...You didn't forget our promise, right?”

“...You're so stubborn. I always keep my word!”

“And yet, you always miss deadlines.”

“That's different!”

It wasn't like he completed the manuscript late on purpose, so that was an out of his hands kind of thing.

I should probably not be alone with Yuu for now just to stick to Hatori's promise...

He became somewhat uneasy when he remembered the incident at the hotel. Yanase had probably been a little bit drunk, but at that time, his eyes had been scary.

What was that all about...?

He had probably been only making fun of the scared Yoshino, but that was a bit of poor taste. If Hatori hadn't called, he probably would have stopped and jokingly said something like “What are you looking all serious for?”, but at that time, Yoshino had been very shaken.

...I think I now understand why Tori is so uneasy with him.

Even if Yanase didn't have any ulterior motives, his face had been very serious when he was drawing. Until now, he had never paid such close attention to Yanase, but if Yoshino's own lover had another man look at him like that, he also would feel worried.

“...Tori.”

“Hm?”

“Let's go on a trip together next time.”

“.....”

At Yoshino's statement, Hatori stopped for a moment. Yoshino pouted, not expecting this reaction.

“What? You don't want to?”

“No, that's not it. I'm just a little surprised. You want to go with me?”

“Yeah, I want to go with you. It's okay even if it's a trip to collect information. Sometimes you need to take a break. You're the one who should be going to the hot springs.”

Day after day, Hatori worked late into the night without taking any breaks and

hardly had any time to himself. Yoshino understood that being an editor was a busy job, but sometimes such vacations were good.

“You're right. I hope we can go someday.”

“Not just ‘someday’! We’ll definitely go! It's a promise, okay?”

“Alright, alright. It's a promise.”

Yoshino felt relieved at getting out the answer he wanted to hear. Then he suddenly felt sleepy. Because his whole body was exhausted, it was hard to stay awake.

“Don't...for...get...”

“You're slurring your words. Are you sleepy? It's fine, go to sleep.”

“I'm...alright...,” he said as he felt his eyelids getting heavy. His eyes flickered until finally it became hard to keep his eyes open.

“Good night.”

Hatori's words were his last memory for the night.

「CHAPTER 4」

“.....How does that sound?”

Even when Yoshino finished speaking, both Yanase and the female assistants remained silent. Some of the girls' shoulders were slightly shaking as they hung their heads.

Oh, huh...? What's wrong.....?

He didn't think that what he had just read was anything to be so moved by. The silence was probably because the story was surprisingly on key, but then somebody broke the silence with a small laugh. Then one by one all the people in the room burst out laughing as if they couldn't sustain it any longer.

“No way! That's so weird. You're actually serious about that?”

“Ahahahaha! That would never happen in real life! I would puke if my boyfriend said that to me!”

“This sucks even for a shoujo manga. If anything, it will draw away the readers.” Apparently their shoulders were shaking because they were trying to sustain their urge to laugh. He certainly thought it was on key, but they were laughing and they were not moved.

“We- well, this is just an example!”

“Even if it's just an example, it's something you thought of, right? Oh, wow is this funny.”

“Wha-! It's not that funny, okay!?” Yoshino angrily defended himself, but the assistants paid no attention to him and rolled with laughter. When he brought up an idea for his next plot, he was received with such a reaction.

Stupid Tori! I'm being laughed at because of you!

He didn't realize how foolish his own personal experiences had been, so putting that into a story was a bad idea and just when he silently cursed at Hatori, he heard his voice in the room.

“What's all this excitement?”

“T- Tori!?” He accidentally squeaked, surprised at his arrival. What a time to show up! Did he have a secret camera hidden somewhere in this room?

“I brought you something to eat. I thought I'd let you take your break now, but looks like you're already taking it.”

“Tha- thank you. Okay, everyone, get to work! We're taking a break at 3 o'clock.”

Hatori hadn't heard what they had just been talking about. He had been too busy paying attention to the assistants, but someone among them happily informed Hatori,

“Please listen to this, Hatori-san.”

“What is it?”

Yoshino's panic grew because Hatori was showing interest. He couldn't very well cover the girl's mouth, so he jumped up from his seat and put his hands on Hatori's ears, trying to cover them up.

“Woah! You don't need to hear that!!”

“Yoshino, you're in the way. Well, that is it?” Hatori was the one who restrained Yoshino instead by simply grabbing Yoshino's hands. Like this, not only did Yoshino fail to cover Hatori's ears, but also now he couldn't even escape. He grew more flustered and suppressing her laughter, the assistant revealed Yoshino's idea for his future story plot that he had told them about.

“Yoshino-san has this idea about a future story plot. He said, ‘What do you think about a situation where a man says ‘I'll give you myself’ to someone on their birthday?’ That would never happen, right!?”

“.....”

Hatori's expression didn't change on the outside, but Yoshino saw that his lip slightly twitched.

He's angry...He's definitely angry...

He had to follow up with something, so he desperately searched for some sort of an excuse.

“Well, this is just one idea! I thought this was kind of far-fetched, too!”

“Far-fetched...?”

“Ah! No! I mean...!”

Not only did he have to explain himself to Hatori, but now he had to explain himself to his assistants. Yoshino was digging his own grave, and Yanase's remark was the final blow.

“Seriously, that would never happen! Just imagine the look on the guy's face when he says something like that!”

“.....!”

On top of that, for some reason Yanase was laughing while looking at Hatori who's expression was growing stiff.

Could it be that he knows...? No, no way, that can't be it!

For a moment, his mind filled with anxiety, but he told himself to stop thinking about such unnecessary things. With that, Yoshino gave up trying to explain himself and instead made up excuses in his head.

I just got a little carried away and thought that I could use that...

Because he had been a manga artist for a long time, he thought that he could use any material that he happened to come across. This was almost like an occupational disease. When Yoshino unintentionally looked down at the desk, he remembered what had happened the following morning of that night. Casually resting on top of the desk was the wristwatch that Hatori had given him as a present. Sometime ago, when they had been in a meeting, he had happened to see this wristwatch in a magazine when he was looking for ideas for his story, but at that time, Yoshino casually had said “This is nice”, and it seemed that Hatori had remembered that.

“This will help you stick to your deadlines”, Hatori had said as he gave him that wristwatch. Hatori was shyer than Yoshino had thought.

As Yoshino absentmindedly thought back to that event, Hatori said in his usual tone of voice, “That's true. This is sour for story material. I expect better material next time.”

“Ye- yes! We'll do our best!”

Yoshino was relieved that Hatori wasn't angry about that being potentially used as story material, but he was startled when he looked at the smile that rarely appeared on Hatori's face.

He...he's not smiling with his eyes...Somehow, I have a bad feeling about this...

And indeed, Yoshino had a reason to be scared, because something definitely happened to him that night.

「CHAPTER 5」

“...I'm hungry...”

He opened his eyes as his stomach made a miserable grumbling noise. As he stared up at the ceiling, eyes half open, he noticed that something smelled good. The aroma of grilled fish and miso soup increased his appetite. No wonder he felt hungry. Still half-asleep, Yoshino slowly got up and left the dimly lit bedroom. Then he went towards the coffee table, which was set up with breakfast, plopped down on the floor, and grabbed chopsticks. But the most important thing was not in front of him.

“Rice...”

As his gaze wandered around searching for his favorite food, Hatori appeared from the kitchen along with a bowl of rice.

“Got up by yourself, huh. I was just about to wake you. Here's the rice.”

“Mm...”

He took the bowl of rice as if it were a matter of course and began to eat.

“You forgot to say it.”

“Itadakimasu...”

As he moved his chopsticks back and forth, his head began to clear up. After swallowing the food in his mouth, he noticed Hatori who was making green tea.

“Oh, Tori. Morning.”

“Morning. So you finally woke up, huh. Oh, careful not to spill anything,” Hatori referred to the shaky way Yoshino used his chopsticks, since he was still a little half-asleep. Yoshino obediently nodded and searched for the soy sauce to cover his omelet with. It was Yoshino's routine to put soy sauce on the sweet omelet.

“Kay. ...Oh, Tori, pass me that.”

“Mhm,” Hatori silently handed over the soy sauce bottle, which stood in front of him.

“Thank you.”

“Chew your food.”

“Kay.”

They continued eating in silence for sometime, but then Hatori suddenly

muttered, "...Let's do it better this time."

"Eh? Do what?"

It was clear in Hatori's head, but Yoshino couldn't understand what he was talking about from such limited context.

"Your birthday. Let's go somewhere to eat."

"You already congratulated me. You even gave me a present and everything, so don't worry about it."

"It's not good enough. Yanase surprised you with cake and wine, right?"

"How do you know that!?"

It wasn't wine, but champagne, even so, Yoshino was surprised that he knew how the situation had played out. A deep furrow on Hatori's forehead appeared, perhaps he realized that the answer to his question was correct.

"....."

"But it wasn't a big deal or anything. He just got me a small cake, and the people at the hotel brought champagne as part of their service."

"I want to celebrate properly anyway. If you don't want to eat out, then we can eat at my place. I'll make your favorite food."

"Why can't we at my place?"

Having Hatori cook in Yoshino's own home was most comfortable for him. Hatori had all the necessary kitchen utensils here, so there wasn't a problem.

"We can't."

"Why?"

"We absolutely can't."

For some reason Hatori was very uncompromising. Yoshino was flexible because it didn't really matter to him all that much.

"A- alright then. Let's go out to eat somewhere. Last time I went out to eat was that time we had our meeting in that café," he said looking at the calendar, which lay on top of the table. He flipped the page to check the next month's schedule.

"Umm...I'm busy with work for a while so...how about April 17th?"

"Is that okay? That's the day of the deadline."

Hearing Yoshino's suggestion, Hatori gave him a puzzled look. It looked like he

wanted to say “Are you serious?”

“It's fine. The deadline is the 16th, isn't it? Even if worst comes to worst, I'll definitely be free the night of the 17th.”

“Is it really okay?”

Obviously, Hatori was suspecting that Yoshino was going to miss the deadline, but it was more like he lacked faith in him than be angry with him. Yoshino somewhat didn't trust himself also, but having Hatori lack faith in him was really annoying.

“You're so untrusting. Seriously, I said it's okay!”

“Alright, I'll take your word for it. I'll make a restaurant reservation. What do you want to eat?”

He looked dissatisfied, but it seemed that he had accepted that for now.

“Let's see...Every once in a while I'll eat a French full course meal!”

He wanted to go to a place where you couldn't go in alone. He had a hunch that he might be able to get some ideas for his next story by going to a high-class restaurant.

“Alright. I'll make a reservation for the 17th at 7 o'clock, so make sure you keep to the deadline.”

“You're so pushy! You can't trust me that much?”

He raised his voice at Hatori, angry at being reminded over and over again, but Hatori coolly answered, “Ask yourself.”

“...Well, that's what I think! Now then, I have to do work once I get home. There aren't any problems with the storyboard, right?”

He purposefully changed the subject since he knew that he couldn't win this argument. Hatori's expression still looked somehow uneasy, but Yoshino pretended not to notice and continued talking about work.

「CHAPTER 6」

Hatori's worry had not been in vain. This month's progress had been going well at first, but in the long run, Yoshino was late as usual and only finished the manuscript on the 17th at sundown. Hatori had been keeping watch the whole time, and when Yoshino finally finished, he quickly took the manuscript and headed towards the printers by taxi.

What should I do? It's already 7 o'clock.....

There was nothing else to do but cancel the restaurant reservation. If he called after 7, there would probably be a cancelation fee.

“Argh. Why am I always like this...?”

Yoshino was disappointed, but Hatori was definitely even more disappointed. Perhaps there was even a likelihood of him being angry. What kind of excuse should he give this time? No, he should think of an apology instead. As he was thinking deeply about that, Hatori returned.

“How is the manuscript...?”

He had been thinking about an excuse or an apology, but his biggest concern was whether or not the printers had accepted the manuscript.

Hatori's lips relaxed a little after Yoshino blurted that out.

“We made it somehow.”

“Thank god... Ah! Sorry, we couldn't go to the restaurant... If there's a cancelation fee, I'll pay for it!”

He bowed deeply with powerful relief. He was ready for Hatori's lecture to come crashing down on him, but unexpectedly Hatori spoke softly.

“I canceled the restaurant reservation yesterday, so there's no problem. I thought you weren't going to finish. This is what happens when you decide to change a scene at the last minute. Plan your storyboard better next time.”

“Urgh.....I'm sorry.....”

His tone of voice wasn't harsh, but that didn't mean it wasn't his usual admonishing tone of voice. However, he didn't dwell on the matter any further.

“Clean up the table immediately.”

“Eh?”

“This is a present,” Hatori said, holding out a box with a cake inside. After Yoshino quickly cleaned the table, he took the white box.

“I was also busy this time. You're not the only one to blame. Let this be my apology.”

Feeling unusually uncomfortable that Hatori was being so humble, he opened the cake box and saw that it was a whole cake decorated with lots of strawberries.

“Wow, cool!! I haven't seen cakes like these in ages!”

What kind of expression did the always-unfriendly Hatori have when he had bought this? Yoshino couldn't even imagine. On top of it all, there was even a chocolate nameplate that read “Happy Birthday Chiaki”.

“There are even candles for my age! How could you tell the store to put 29 candles!? Ouch!”

A fist came crashing down on his head.

“If you don't want it, then I'll take it back.”

“No, I want it! Aren't you going to eat this? Can we eat this now? Itadakimasu~”

He hurriedly picked up a fork and attacked the circle cake. It had been a while since he tasted such sweet fresh cream, so he couldn't help grinning. The strawberries were even more sweet and fresh than he had expected, and the sponge cake was fluffy and delicious.

“Hm? Aren't you going to eat this too?”

“No. You can eat all of it.

Hatori took a beer from the fridge and sat drinking at the table.

He felt awkward that Hatori was staring at him, but it was also embarrassing to let Hatori know that, so he focused on eating the cake.

“I should have bought at least a flower, after all.”

“I told you I don't need such things. Where would I even put something like that in this place?”

“But still...”

For some reason, Hatori did not look satisfied.

Well isn't Tori quite the romantic or what? I didn't expect for him to want everything done properly...Is that why he became a shoujo manga editor?

Wasn't there anything that could cheer up Hatori? A gift in return wouldn't work, but there was one thing that Yoshino himself could do.

...Ah.

Just then, he suddenly came up with an idea.

“Tori, there's something I want.”

“What is it?”

Looking at Hatori with an unusually serious expression, he gave a short reply.

“A kiss.”

“Yo- Yoshino.....?”

He kept a strong, straight gaze at Hatori, who was looking questioningly at him, and said, “I don't need presents. I just want your kiss on every one of my birthdays...How does that sound? I thought of that just now, but do you think I can use that in my next story?”

“.....”

“If something like this was said in real life, it would draw away the person, but it's okay if it's in a manga, right?”

It was embarrassing for him to think such things. Even if it was material for his story, he could not stand to say such sugary words. Just when he forced himself to laugh to hide these feelings, Hatori grabbed the back of his neck and tilted his head up.

“.....”

“Mmph!? Mmm.....!”

Yoshino was unable to dodge this sudden kiss, and Hatori mercilessly inserted his tongue inside his mouth. Hatori's lips finally left his after having kissed him so deeply that Yoshino felt like he was going to lose consciousness.

“Hah...! What are you doing all of a sudden!?”

“You told me to do that.”

“I told you it was material for my manga! ...Mmph! Mm...!”

Hatori kissed him again, cutting him off mid-speech. He pushed on Hatori's shoulders, trying to get his face away from his, but he was no match for him. The sweet kiss was leaving Yoshino powerless.

“This is the second time,” Hatori warned him with an indifferent expression after

breaking off their noisy kiss.

“Enough!”

This is not funny!

Yoshino managed to escape Hatori's embrace and tried to hide behind the sofa. However, he was soon caught in Hatori's arms.

“Gya! Let go!!”

“Don't run.”

“It's cause you're doing weird things!!”

“You said you wanted me to do this, didn't you?”

“I was joking...!”

He frantically argued, and Hatori lightly laughed.

“That's a lie. I just want to do it.”

“.....!”

His heart gave a leap at the sound of the husky, sweet whisper. Inadvertently, Yoshino stopped moving, and Hatori spoke into his ear as if he were holding a treasure.

“Happy birthday.”

“...Thank...you...”

“There are twenty-seven more times left.”

“.....”

He was simply being swept away with the mood – Yoshino told himself that and quietly closed his eyes.

「CHAPTER 7」

Right now, the atmosphere in the third conference room at Marukawa Shoten was so tense that it hurt. Everyone was silently working with their hands and only the sound of pens on paper and the sound of screen tones being cut down to size echoed in the room. The deadline had already passed, but because the printers were willing to wait, Yoshino and the others shut themselves in the conference room and earnestly worked on the manuscript.

First, I will finish the rough draft...no, I should ink before doing the rough draft otherwise the assistants won't have anything to do...Argh, what should I do!?

Yoshino felt irritated with himself for being so indecisive. He was tired and lacked sleep, so his ability to think was failing, and he couldn't even make simple decisions.

Yoshino Chiaki - pen name, Yoshikawa Chiharu – was a shoujo manga artist who took pride in always hitting the top-sale charts and who even had a manga series made into a drama as well as an anime. He took interest in drawing manga when he had been only a child. Since his debut as an artist around the time he was in university, he had overcome many deadlines, but this was the first time he was in such a terrible crunch time. And that was Yoshino for you, not even imagining that the day would come when he and his team would be forced to shut themselves up in the publishing company's conference room and desperately draw in order to make it on time.

“Yoshino, how many more blank pieces of manuscript do you have left?” Hatori Yoshiyuki, an editor in charge of Yoshino, asked as he erased. Although usually smartly dressed in a suit, today he wasn't wearing his suit jacket. His necktie was loosened and the sleeves on his white shirt were rolled up.

Aww...even Tori is looking shabby...

Now that he thought about it, this was probably the first time he had seen Hatori – his childhood friend whom he grew up with, making them both as close as brothers – look so exhausted. On top of that, when he thought that this was his own fault, his heart hurt with guilt.

This crunch time was pretty bad, so when Yoshino said “My drawing skills suck

right now”, Hatori who made it his duty to do the chores, shopping and cooking in time of help, showed up. Also this time, Yoshino's assistants showed up because they couldn't disregard these circumstances. Hatori was probably told to just do the erasing, but Yoshino was still very grateful to him, because Hatori could handle so much labor at once.

“...Eight...no, seven left...,” Yoshino counted the blank sheets used for the manuscript which were laying beside him and spoke with great effort. Even talking was a burden right now.

“I see. You've made quite a progress. A little bit more to go, so hang in there.”

“Yeah...”

Right now, Hatori's encouraging words went in one ear and came out the other. It definitely wasn't a little bit more to go.

Tori sounds tired too...

But that was to be expected, since just like Yoshino, Hatori had also only got about an hour of naptime for these past several days. But even then, Hatori cheered Yoshino on, so Yoshino applauded him. Yoshino's eyelids felt heavy and his hand felt stiff as he held his mechanical pencil. Although he kept working, there were still blank manuscript pages left. He couldn't see the future ahead of him. This seemed as if it would go on for eternity.

This wouldn't have happened if I hadn't agreed to do that at that time...

Regret crossed his mind, but it was too late now. The cause for being even more at his wit's end now than usual was because he had undertaken an urgent assignment. Yoshino made that decision, so he knew that he had no right to complain, but at the very least, he wanted to curse himself for thinking he could do it at that time. The artist who was supposed to draw the magazine cover and front color insert page was hospitalized due to suddenly falling ill, so Yoshino was one of the people to be asked to do it instead. A recent but already popular newbie did the front color insert page, but the cover of the magazine is a magazine's main attraction, so obviously it can't be entrusted to a newbie, so Hatori apologetically requested Yoshino to do it.

That day, after finally showing up at the cafe and reaching Yoshino's table, Hatori gravely began to speak...

* * * *

“Yoshino, I have a request.”

For someone who came just to discuss the plot of the story, Hatori had a very stern expression on his face, and this worried Yoshino. It seemed that he had some sort of request, which was difficult to ask.

“Wh- why are you so solemn...?”

“The truth is... I want you to draw the cover for this upcoming issue.”

“When you say upcoming, you mean the issue two months from now, right?”

“No, next month's issue.”

“Huh!? What bullshit are you saying!? The deadline for submitting the cover of next month's issue is almost here! I mean, Sasahara-sensei should have warned us, right?”

“Sasahara-sensei fell ill and was hospitalized. She's undergoing immediate surgery and I don't know when she will be discharged.”

“Sur- surgery...,” Yoshino gulped upon hearing such news from Hatori. Many manga artists greatly destroyed their health while they were young due to living a disorderly lifestyle.

Because of that, it hit close to home for Yoshino. Besides, it wasn't known when she would be discharged from the hospital, meaning her work won't be serialized in the magazine anymore. Surely, she herself was most full of regret. Yoshino didn't personally know her but liked her work and looked forward to it with each issue. As a reader and as a fellow artist he wanted to help her but didn't feel like he had the time, so he couldn't readily agree to this request.

“I understand the situation, but you know best that I have my manuscript to do, don't you? If time allowed, I would undertake this job, but right now it is positively impossible for me.”

This month, he had to do the cover page and the cover for the drama CD, so he felt like he was already late with the storyboard. If he undertook any other assignments, there was a chance that he would not complete the manuscript on time and the manuscript was the most important.

“Yes, but I don't have anyone else to ask besides you.”

“Tori...”

“I am begging you,” Hatori said, put his hands on his knees, and deeply bowed his head.

I feel like the last time he had such a troubled look on his face was the Summer of last year when he said “I love you” to me....

Yoshino silently looked at the unusual sight of Hatori down turning his head.

“So, Yoshino will you not do it?”

“...Urgh...! Okay, I get it; I'll do it! But just this one favor!”

* * * *

Involuntarily, Yoshino agreed when Hatori lowered his head to him, but even under usual circumstances he barely made it on time with his manuscript, so in all honesty, he didn't have any self-confidence that he was going to make it on time now more than before. Sure enough, his schedule was tight and he was suffering so much he felt like he was going to die. The magazine cover took a lot of time, but the main reason he was late with the manuscript was because he didn't finish the storyboard as he had expected.

Oh no, my hand is starting to feel weak.

He put down his pen for a moment and repeatedly opened and closed his hand. As he did that, blood rushed back to his hand, and it felt a little bit more comfortable. It was very hard to stay awake, because his head was all hazy. Yoshino didn't want to complain so he hid the fact that he had caught a cold and had a fever and was feeling very badly. Nevertheless, he didn't want to give up on the manuscript. Having used up practically all of his physical strength and will power, Yoshino exerted himself solely due to pride.

“Hey, Yoshino, your face is red. Are you okay?” Hatori sounded worried as he handed the draft copy of a manuscript page, which he had just finished erasing the lines from, to one of the girl assistants. But at this point in time, it was pointless for Yoshino to say, “Actually, I have a fever...”

So he said, “I'm fine, I'm fine. It's probably due to lack of sleep.”

“I’m sorry to force you...”

From the look on Hatori's face, Yoshino understood that Hatori was blaming himself. Not wanting to worry Hatori, who was pushing himself just as much as Yoshino, Yoshino collected himself and replied with a lively tone of voice.

“It's useless to say something like that now. Here, please erase this one too.”

Hiding that he felt sick, he handed Hatori a manuscript page which he had just finished inking. Hatori took it apologetically, checked to make sure that the ink was dry, and carefully began to erase. Even though Yoshino's regular assistants helped with the manuscript as well as Hatori, who was free from his editor job, the prospects of finishing the manuscript were still a long ways away.

If only Yuu was here right now...No, I thought I had decided I won't rely on him!

Actually, he was in the middle of a mini cold war with his chief assistant Yanase Yuu right now, so he hadn't seen him for a while and didn't call him for help because it would be awkward. Yanase was angry about what had happened on their hot springs trip recently. They had gone to the hot springs for Yoshino's birthday, but many things had happened and without staying the night, Yoshino left Yanase behind and went home.

Yoshino knew he was in the wrong and wanted to apologize, but Yanase continued to act sullen by saying, “Forget it!”, so this made Yoshino angry, and with that, they had stopped speaking to each other. Because Yanase wasn't here, they were not doing too good during this crunch time. Although he knew that the situation would improve somewhat if Yanase were here, he did not want to be the one to apologize first. Right now, it was almost as bad as being so busy that there aren't enough hours in a day, but he had his pride to protect.

I'll finish this even if Yuu isn't here...!

Just after he swore that and scratched the tip of his pen against the manuscript paper, he heard a short knock. Editor-in-charge of the Emerald Editorial Department, Takano Masamune peeked inside the conference room, after modestly opening the door. He was holding a silver thermos, paper cups and had a bag from the drugstore.

“I brought coffee. I also have energy drinks and jelly drinks, so please let me know which ones you want.”

It seemed that he had gone shopping while he had been out on an errand. They all

felt ashamed for making the editor-in-charge do such a thing, but thankful at the same time.

“Takano-san, thank you, you didn't have to...” Yoshino looked up, thanking him, and Takano gave him a kind smile in return. No matter in what kind of tight situation they were in, only this person kept a cool countenance, and that was amazing.

“No, it's alright, this is a job for someone who has their hands empty. Besides, this was quite a huge favor to ask of you, so please let me know if there is anything I can do. Everyone, please don't hesitate to do so either.”

“Um, excuse me, could I have some coffee...?”

“Ah, me too, please”

At Takano's words, the assistants timidly raised their hands in unison. The girls must have about reached their limit as well. He didn't want to force them to stay up all night, and at the end of each crunch time, they didn't get a decent vacation either. Nevertheless, this time, they came to help him without any complaints. He couldn't thank the girl assistants enough for coming to assist him each time, even though this wasn't their permanent job.

“Ah, um, I'll do that.”

But Takano stopped Onodera, who was volunteering to be the coffee pourer.

“I'll do it. You continue on with your work. It doesn't make sense for you to be responsible for this.”

“...Alright,” Onodera returned to his seat and set about continuing to color in the white spaces, which he had been in the middle of doing. He had said that he had never done this sort of job before, but he turned out to be good with his hands and finished a whole lot more than was expecting to.

“How's it going, Hatori?”

After Takano distributed coffee to the assistants, he spoke to Hatori. After Hatori was done erasing, he began phototypesetting.

“Still not done. How is it over there?”

Hatori was probably inquiring about the negotiations with the printers. Not too long ago, Takano said he was stepping out to take care of something and that must have been his purpose for doing so.

“They said the deadline is tomorrow morning at eight.”

Yoshino, who was listening in, was surprised to hear the time Takano said. If it was due at eight in the morning, didn't that mean they only had six hours left?

Shit, why doesn't my hand move faster...?

Yoshio desperately moved his hand on paper as he gave them a sidelong glance, meanwhile wondering if they should drop it or propose to have the part they finished be published. Nevertheless, it seemed like they had already reached their limit. When he calculated how many hours they had left, he knew they would definitely not complete it on time. It was impossible, even if he worked on it at his fastest pace.

Yoshino gritted his teeth, angry at how weak he was. If they drop the manuscript, Hatori would probably blame himself for asking Yoshino to do the sudden assignment, and Yoshino's readers, who looked forward to the new chapter more than anything, would be disappointed. By no means did he want to let them down. His eyes burnt with regret, but crying wasn't going to solve anything. Just when he bit his lip and desperately tried not to give up on everything, the conference room door opened without any prior notice.

“Excuse me.”

“Eh...?”

Yoshino involuntarily turned around at the sound of the familiar voice and sure enough he saw a familiar face. Not expecting to see this person to show up, Yoshino involuntarily gaped. He blinked, not believing what he was seeing and rubbed his eyes, but the person in front of him did not disappear.

“Wh- why is Yuu...”

“What, you're still not done? Hey, give me the stuff that still needs background. I'll take care of it, so you just focus on your own work,” Yanase snapped as he took off his jacket and sat down in an empty seat. Yoshino involuntarily stared at Yanase who took out his supplies from his own bag.

“What's the situation?”

“Ten pages of the manuscript have been completed, but there are still seven blank ones,” Hatori answered Yanase's question. Out of everyone in the conference room, the only person who was surprised at Yanase's arrival was Yoshino.



“Got it. Everyone, if you're not busy at the moment, show me what you got so far. I'll check it over.”

Suddenly, Yoshino asked Yanase, who was giving out orders as he always did:

“Why...didn't you call me...?”

“Stop whining and keep working. I'll answer all your questions later.”

“O- okay.”

Yanase's order was reasonable. Right now, completing the manuscript was the top priority. Yoshino pulled himself together and concentrated on the manuscript.

* * * *

“Good work, you did great,” Hatori said his thanks as he put all the completed and checked over pages of the manuscript into an envelope. Yoshino finally relaxed upon hearing these words.

“Mhm, you helped too, Tori. Thanks.”

“This is my job. Well then, I will look after this.”

“Yeah. I leave the rest to you...”

The finishing touches as well as the phototypesetting was complete, and now Hatori headed over to the printers with the finished manuscript in his hands. After seeing Hatori off, Yoshino crashed his head down on the desk.

We really finished...!

As he was working on it, he kept thinking they weren't going to finish, but somehow they did. It was all thanks to everyone who had helped him with everything. Takano had returned back to his normal duties by now, having confirmed that the manuscript was safe and complete, and the only people in the conference room, other than Yoshino, were the girl assistants, the new editor Onodera, and Yanase. Although the assistants were happy that they finished the manuscript on time, everyone was exhausted and had a soulless expression on their face. After every crunch time, he thought it couldn't get any worse, but this crunch time was so hectic that it vied for first place in terms of worst crunch time.

“Good work everyone. Seriously, thanks. Oh, thank you to you too, Onodera-

san.” He deeply bowed to Onodera who was standing nearby.

“No, I'm sorry I wasn't very useful...”

“That's not true. You really saved us!”

Originally, Yoshino would pay him for being his assistant, but no matter how much help Yoshino got, the editors said, “It's my job,” and would not accept the money. He always asked Hatori what kind of thanks he should give instead, but Hatori's reply was always. “How about you draw the manuscript on time next time?”

“That makes me very happy when you say that. Oh, you must be hungry, right? I'll go buy something.”

“Eh? No, it's fine. You're probably tired too, Onodera-san.”

“A shop selling delicious onigiri opened nearby. I'll go buy everyone some, okay?” said Onodera and quickly left the conference room. He also must be quite tired, so Yoshino felt sorry for making him fuss over them. Speaking of feeling sorry, he should apologize to Yanase as well. He nervously began to speak to Yanase who was quickly cleaning up.

“...Thanks as well, Yuu. You saved us a lot.”

“It's nothing, it's my job,” he answered, which got rid off some of the awkwardness, but his reply was still cold.

How is he still sulking...?

He thought, but if he said that out loud, he would lose his chance to make up. Just when he kept himself in check and racked his brain for some sort of topic to talk about, Yanase was the one to apologize.

“I acted childish, too. Sorry.”

“Eh? Ah, it's okay.”

It seemed that just like Yoshino, Yanase also felt awkward. He was probably acting cold to hide it.

“I'll be going then.”

“Where are you going?”

“Nakajima-sensei's place. She begged me in tears to come back to her after I was done here.”

“Eh?! You should rest at least a little...”

It seemed that although he had just gotten through crunch time, he was going to go work without even a moment's rest.

“They're tight on schedule with their deadline, too, so there's nothing I can do. See ya, Chiaki. Get some good rest today.”

As Yanase dashed out, Yoshino dumbfoundly stared after him in the same manner he had stared when Yanase had arrived, but then he heard the girl assistants sigh regretfully. Involuntarily, Yoshino overheard their conversation.

“Aww, Yanase-san left.”

“We didn't talk to him much today again.”

“There's nothing we can do. Work is work...”

“But, you regret it the most, don't you, Nozomi?”

“Tha- that's not true.....!”

The youngest assistant Nozomi who had joined them last year, exclaimed in a fluster.

Why would she regret it?

Usually, the girls and Yanase didn't talk to each other on familiar terms, so it seemed that they weren't good friends. The girls didn't show much signs of interest in manga, so it seemed that there was nothing to talk about...

As Yoshino listened in wonderment, the girls continued their talk about Yanase.

“But Yanase-san is just as amazing as I had expected. His orders are punctual, and even though he works quickly, he does it perfectly.”

“That's exactly why he's a super assistant. If only I could draw background like that... Oh, besides, when Yanase-san is here, the atmosphere changes, don't you think?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it does! When I feel that I can't do anything anymore, as soon as Yanase-san shows up, I feel like everything will be alright or rather, I feel encouraged...” Nozomi said with a fuzzy look on her face, and the other two simultaneously teased her.

“Aren't you praising him a little too much?”

“Pretty sure you act differently when Yanase-san is here.”

“If you like him that much, you should just confess.”

“Eh?! Nozomi-chan, you like Yuu!?” He was so surprised at the girls' conversation that he blurted that out loud.

Nozomi hung her head in embarrassment, and the other assistants looked even more surprised than Yoshino.

“Sensei, you've never noticed until now?”

“It's so obvious, isn't it?”

“Well that's inevitable, isn't it? Sensei is a sensitive person, but kind of an airhead...” Rie, who had been his assistant the longest, sighed.

“A-an air head, you say...” He certainly didn't pay too much attention to how people acted around each other, but to have his assistants think of him an “airhead” was a surprise!

“Wait...! Haruka-san, Rie-san, please don't say such unnecessary things! It's not like that!”

Haruka pressed the flustered Nozomi further with questions. It seemed that Nozomi couldn't stand up to both of her senpai, because they had taught her the techniques of being an assistant.

“Then what it is?”

“I- I respect him... or rather, I admire him!!”

“How is that different?”

“It is...!”

Now Yoshino himself was convinced about Nozomi, who looked really embarrassed.

Ah...now I see. When you put it that way, she really does act differently.

Come to think of it, whenever she had questions she usually asked Yanase and not him, and when she made sweets, she offered them to Yanase first.

“Oh yeah, I always wanted to ask this – does Yanase-san have a lover? Sensei, you're his childhood friend, right? Do you know?”

“Hatori is my childhood friend. Yuu is my classmates from middle school. But if you want to know, why don't you ask the person himself?” He answered, putting Rie in her rightful place, and everyone had an expression on their faces like, “You've got to be kidding me!”

“I can't ask him! It will be hard to bring up such a topic with Yanase-san, won't it? I mean, that's not something you can just talk about casually...”

“But that's what makes him stoic and cool, right!?”

“Ha ha ha...” He forced a laugh at how worked up the girls were getting. He had been exhausted until just now, but the minute he heard this gossip he livened up.

I guess he does seem stoic if you look at him from a girl's perspective.

Yanase did appear cool, but that was just what he was like. He thought it was pointless to interact with people or put the energy to things that he had no interest in, so he didn't join in with other people's conversations.

“Well, what do you think? Does he have a girlfriend?”

“No, I think he probably doesn't have one right now. First of all, he seems to have a lot of free time.”

He did assistant work for practically the whole month, and when he had free time he hanged out at Yoshino's place or went on trips with Yoshino, so he probably didn't have time to find a lover.

“Really!? I bet you're glad to hear that, Nozomi!”

“Haruka-san, I said that's enough!!”

“I know, but...!”

The assistants were getting even more excited and worked up, so he failed to mention one other thing about Yanase.

He said there was someone he liked, though...Ah whatever, they look like they're having fun.

He felt bad about bringing this up when they were so excited and decided to hold off on telling them what Yanase had confessed to him.

* * * *

“Well then, good work.”

“Good work to you~! Let's do well next month too.”

“Yes. Let's definitely make sure not to be late next time.”

“I- I'll try...”

After eating the bento Onodera brought them, the assistants had gone home. Alone in the conference room, Yoshino waited for Hatori to return from the printers.

Hatori had told him he could go home, but Yoshino decided that in case there was some kind of problem with receiving the manuscript, it would probably be best to stay here so he could deal with it. Besides, he wanted to apologize to Hatori who had also gone through the trouble of helping him out. The schedule had been thrown out of order because of the unexpected job that came up, but because he was the one who had agreed to do it, he was responsible for submitting the manuscript late.

I mean, even if I go home right now, I don't think I could sleep...

He had been tired, but now his weariness had disappeared somewhere. Surely this was because he had stayed up all night repeatedly so his internal clock was messed up and his nervous system wasn't working too good either. As he waited for Hatori, he suddenly remembered the conversation he had with the assistants.

“So Yuu has an unrequited love~ He's as popular as always, huh?”

Yanase had been extremely popular since he was a student. In terms of unfriendliness, Yanase and Hatori were about the same, but Yanase beat Hatori in terms of having girls call him out many times after school, and giving him chocolates for Valentines Day and even their male senpai often favored him. However, he didn't remember Yanase introducing him to any special lover, so he had never felt any sign of anyone like that existing in Yanase's life.

I wonder what the person Yuu likes is like?

He wondered about this again but couldn't even imagine it. Back at the hotel, he had hesitated to ask who Yanase likes, but now it was indeed bothering him. They had practically never talked about love affairs since they were students. Yanase seemed indifferent about that, but Yanase is a man, so he must have a girl or two.

“Oh yeah, what was that again...?”

Yoshino suddenly thought back to the scene he had witnessed earlier; the scene that happened behind the Marukawa Shoten building after he had returned from delivering the manuscript. It had looked like Hatori and Yanase were kissing on that rainy day. Most of their silhouettes had been hidden behind an umbrella, but their faces were so close to each other, so he didn't think he was mistaken about that.

From that incident, Yoshino deciphered that Yanase and Hatori liked each other, but he might be wrong because they both denied it. They didn't act like they were hiding

their embarrassment. But Hatori said he knew the person who Yanase likes very well, so maybe it was a person from work?

“Someone Hatori knows very well, huh...? Me? No way!” Yoshino laughed loudly at this worrisome candidate that finally came out. He wasn't thinking right, probably because he had just stayed up all night. He suspected that it was because of that, otherwise he would never think up something like that. He tried to place every member of the editing department as a potential candidate to be Yanase's lover, but none of the people fit. The other assistant jobs that Yanase did were with sensei that drew shonen manga, so he didn't think that those sensei were acquainted with Hatori, a shoujo manga editor.

If she's so interested in Yuu, she should just date him.

He thought that Nozomi is a nice girl, and Yanase is a really nice guy. They would make a really good-looking couple. As he thought about such a selfish, none-of-his-business thing, Hatori appeared in the conference room.

“Yoshino, you still haven't gone home?”

“Ah, welcome back. Did they receive the manuscript alright?”

“Yeah, we made it somehow. Thanks to how hard you worked,” he said with a tired smile on his face, and suddenly Yoshino felt flustered. Usually, Hatori was silently overflowing with anger after each time Yoshino exceeded the deadline, so being praised by him now confused him.

“Wh- what are you talking about?” He opened his eyes wide in surprise at Hatori's rare kind words.

Even though he always looks like he wants to say, “You're a shitty manga artist who goes past deadlines!”...

Hatori continued to apologize to Yoshino, who was confused and not believing his own ears.

“I'm really sorry this time. I asked an unreasonable favor from you, so...”

“It's okay. We finished it somehow.”

He quickly stopped Hatori who was trying to apologize again. He was happy that he was being thanked, but he felt uncomfortable at these words because he wasn't used to hearing them. In order to hide that, Yoshino began to fake going home in an obvious

manner.

“Umm...then I guess I'll be going.”

“Then wait, I'll call a taxi,” Hatori said, and took out his cellphone. But the train station wasn't that far away, and he generally got car sick, so honestly, he did not want to go by taxi.

“Oh I don't need a taxi. I want to go shopping on my way home, and it's not the middle of the night, so I can go home by train- Ngh!” Yoshino stood up as he declined Hatori's offer, because he did not need to be fussing over him that much, but the moment he stood up, he got tunnel vision and involuntarily, placed his hands on the desk. His temple throbbed painfully and then he was hit with a violent headache.

“Are you okay, Yoshino!?!”

“I'm...I'm okay...”

Somehow, he replied with a smile to Hatori who was quick to support Yoshino's rocky state, but there was nothing he could do about the splitting head pain. Because his head vibrated when he talked, he couldn't continue anymore.

I feel like my head is splitting.

It felt like the inside of his head was swimming. He was losing his sense of balance, his vision began spinning, and he felt like he was going to throw up. Yoshino grit his teeth, endured his bad physical condition, and tried not to think about the pain.

“You don't look okay. I knew it, you're not feeling well, right? Forget the taxi, I'll take you home myself. Wait a moment.”

Hatori tried to make him sit down in a chair, but Yoshino couldn't support himself anymore. He let gravity take its course and collapsed down on the floor.

“Yoshino!? Hey, Yoshino!!”

“.....”

He heard Hatori's flustered voice, but couldn't even reply anymore.

Oh yeah, I have a cold, don't I...

He had completely forgotten this, because he had been so happy to finish the manuscript, but a cold wouldn't go away because of that. This foolish thought popped into Yoshino's head as he lost consciousness.

「CHAPTER 8」

“...I'm hungry...”

Yoshino opened his eyes to the sound of himself unconsciously speaking and heard Hatori laugh with amazement.

“How is that the first thing you say when you wake up?”

He looked around thinking about what Hatori had said, but something seemed strange. He was in his own bedroom at his own home. When in the world had he returned home and how had he slipped into bed? Why was Hatori here?

What happened?

Yoshino searched his memory and remembered that he had collapsed in the conference room at Marukawa Shoten.

“I collapsed, didn't I? I'm at home, right?”

“This is definitely your home and your own bed.”

“How did I get home?”

“I brought you home. It was difficult after you collapsed. I carried you to the nearest hospital, they examined you and said that this happened because you are sick, overworked, and didn't get enough sleep, so they hooked you up to an IV.”

“Urgh...I caused you trouble...”

He felt bad hearing what had really happened from Hatori. As if the issue with the manuscript wasn't bad enough, now it seemed that he had caused even more trouble.

“You slept for about two whole days; sometimes waking up to ask for water.”

“Th- that long...?”

He was surprised that he had slept for two days, but at the same time understood that perhaps because of that he now felt better. It seemed that his fever had gone down and his terrible headache was gone also.

“How do you feel?”

“I'm completely fine now. My head doesn't hurt and I don't feel tired.”

The moment he said that, his stomach grumbled. Hearing that, Hatori gave a small chuckle and stood up.

“Hold on, I'll make you something.”



Hatori went to the kitchen, leaving Yoshino alone to look around the room. What he saw surprised him. Beside the bed lay a blanket and a cooling bag. A laptop and some sort of documents were also there as if someone had been working here until just now. A half empty plastic sports drink bottle had a straw sticking out of it from which Yoshino himself probably had drank out of.

Could it be that he had looked after me the whole time...?

Then he noticed that he was wearing pajamas, but surely he must have been sweating with fever, so they would be sticking to him, but they weren't. Hatori must have changed his clothes and wiped off the sweat from his body. He nervously lowered the futon to check the pattern on his underwear and saw that it was different from what he had remembered.

“You've got to be kidding me...”

Although that was something that had to be done, he became greatly embarrassed when he pictured how it must have played out.

He's more like my mother than my lover...

Actually, his own mother didn't even fuss over him that much. How could he face Hatori after something like this? But he and Hatori had been going out for a year already, so he shouldn't feel embarrassed about having Hatori see him naked. He should be feeling “bad” about this because having his clothes changed while unconscious was not society's idea of “dating”.

...Has it already been one year...?

He felt like when he was twenty, time had not flown by as fast as it did now. These past several years had gone by in the blink of an eye. Usually, once people become lovers, they spend their first days constantly with each other and repeatedly go on dates, but he felt like he didn't see Hatori any more than usual, never mind constantly.

Whenever he saw Hatori it was pretty much only during business meetings and during crunch time. There was nothing sexy about this. If you count the amount of times they had slept together it was less than the amount of fingers on both hands. In that sense, that amount had not changed unless you count touching.

Ah, but...

Hatori now looked at him more tenderly than before. Yoshino noticed that he

looked at him somehow sweetly and it usually made him involuntarily avert his eyes. When he looked into those eyes, he felt tightness in his chest. This was probably because Hatori's eyes expressed his feelings more clearly than his words did. But Yoshino couldn't reciprocate those same feelings. He liked Hatori. He wanted him to stay by his side. As a childhood friend and as a best friend, he was an important person to him, but sometimes, his feelings for Hatori greatly overwhelmed him. He felt bad about this, and yet, he had feelings of doubt about their new-formed relationship. Nevertheless, he could not live without the comfortable lifestyle that Hatori made possible for him.

It was selfish of Yoshino. Although he knew this was a sly thing to do, he wanted to keep Hatori's affection all to himself.

“Yoshino, are you sleeping?”

“Eh? Ah, no, I'm awake. I just spaced out for a little.”

He quickly sat up when he heard Hatori's voice. It seemed that he hadn't noticed Hatori's presence because he had been lost in thought. On the tray, which was positioned on the sideboard table, lay a small hot pot used for cooking rice porridge as well as other condiments, and there was also hand made tsukudani and an omelet roll. The smell of fluffy rice stimulated his appetite.

“I tried to make a variety of things, but you don't have to force yourself to eat everything.”

“I'm hungry, so I'm gonna eat it all. I would have went over there if you called me.”

Even someone as lazy as Yoshino would have carried himself to the dining table if Hatori had told him to come.

“You're recovering, so take it easy for now.”

Hatori adjusted Yoshino's pillow to align with his back, so it would be easy to eat while sitting in bed. He wanted to thank Hatori for nursing him and being with him during crunch time, but he was too engrossed with satisfying his appetite now.

“Slow down a little. Eating too quickly is bad for your digestion.”

“I know.”

“Don't talk with food in your mouth. It's bad manners,” Hatori warned, but Yoshino couldn't control himself. He was starving and the food tasted very delicious. It

had also been a while since he had eaten Hatori's cooking. During crunch time all he had eaten were instant food and frozen meals, so now he “felt like a new man” as they say in literature.

“Haa- that was delicious! Thanks for the meal!”

He emptied the hot pot in a blink of an eye, and devoured the side dishes without leaving anything behind.

“It was nothing. If you can eat that much, then you must be better now.”

“I think I can eat more.”

“Eating too much all of a sudden would upset your stomach, so don't. You should eat again later if you're hungry,” Hatori explained as he prepared brown rice tea.

“Okay, okay.”

Yoshino could almost taste the refreshing taste of the tea from the pleasant aroma.

“Haa – I'm happy the food was so good!”

“I'm glad. Here, drink some medicine. You have to take it after every morning and evening meal, so don't forget to take it tonight.”

“Mhm, okay.”

After he drank the powder packet medicine with hot water, he sipped the brown rice tea again to kill the after taste.

“Yep, eating delicious food and lying around is true happiness.”

“I agree about the delicious food, but I don't know about lying around. Don't talk like a slacker.”

“You know what? I just want to enjoy this moment, okay?”

Yoshino inadvertently looked at the calendar as he drank the brown rice tea, and then his eyes paused on a date. It bothered him that the date was vigorously circled.

What was it....? Seems like I forgot something...Oh! Hakone!!

He had talked with Hatori about wanting to go on a trip to Hakone the following weekend after he was done with the manuscript. They were to go early in the morning on Sunday, leave early in the morning the next day and go straight to the company, so their plan to stay one night should have all worked out, but when he looked at his digital wristwatch, he saw that this planned day was tomorrow.

“He- hey, Tori.”

“Hm? Do you want another cup of tea?”

“No! Um, what should we do about tomorrow...?” Yoshino nervously began, and Hatori softly said with a calm look on his face.

“I know we planned a trip, but you're still recovering even if you do feel better now. You need to rest at home this weekend.”

“But...”

Yoshino knew just how much Hatori had been looking forward to the trip, having planned it all himself, so he felt bad about this. He felt guilty for going on a trip with Yanase two times already and leaving Hatori behind, so he felt ashamed for breaking his promise now. Besides, Yoshino himself wanted very much to go also.

Now that he thought about it, he hadn't gone on a trip with Hatori since that trip after they had graduated from university. Although they were going to stay for only one night, Yoshino had looked forward to this trip from the bottom of his heart, so he didn't want to simply give up on it.

“It's alright. I'm feeling fine already. Let's go like we planned.”

“You didn't do the plot. Just stay at home this time.”

Before the trip, Yoshino was supposed to finish the plot for the upcoming manuscript, but because he had been asleep the whole time, he obviously didn't do it, but still, it was annoying to have to cancel their plans because of this.

“You're always like this! Only work, work, work!”

Yoshino was dissatisfied and angry at how stubborn Hatori was being.

I just finished the previous manuscript, I should get at least a little break...

Hatori lectured while Yoshino pouted.

“What can you do? You're a working person, so naturally work is your top priority.”

“But what's the point of work then? Right now, you're saying that we live to work. And seriously, all we ever do lately is talk about work! At least it's exciting to talk to Yuu cause we can talk about our hobbies.”

Hatori responded to Yoshino with silence. By the look in his eyes, Yoshino could tell that Hatori was getting displeased.

Oh no...are we gonna get in a fight again...?

He had blurted out something insensitive again, and his heart pounded with anticipation, but Hatori didn't snap at him, only sighed.

“Anyway, you have to still stay in bed. What would you do if you got sick again from being too careless?” Hatori said as he put on his suit jacket, which hung on the wall, after he had cleared away the tableware.

“I'm going to the office, so you just stay in bed.”

Hatori gathered his documents and laptop and quickly started to head out.

“You're leaving already?”

“A lot of work has piled up... You don't have to get up. You can just see me off sitting in bed like that.”

“I'll be fine if I get up for just a second. Besides, I laid in bed for two days, so I can't sleep for a while.”

Barefooted, Yoshino followed Hatori.

“Let's see, I made rice in the rice cooker, so eat that at night. I've prepared several side dishes, which should last you the weekend. Ah, turn off the rice cooker warm setting right away. Take medicine after meals. If you need anything else, just reach me on my cellphone.”

“I got it, I got it. I'll eat if I'm hungry. I'll turn the rice cooker switch off and take my medicine.”

Hatori was very fussy. Yoshino knew he himself was to blame for his own careless lifestyle, but Hatori didn't have to be this nagging.

“I have no choice but to trust you... Well, I'll be going.”

“Mhm, see you later. Here, your bag.”

Yoshino handed Hatori his bag, which he had placed on the agari-kamachi in order to put on his shoes. This scenario reminded Yoshino of something, and he stared at Hatori's face.

“Oh, yes. Thank you.... Is there something on my face?”

“No, I just think that this kind of makes us like newlyweds.”

It seemed like he was a wife seeing off her husband. Yoshino said this jokingly, but Hatori gulped slightly and gazed at Yoshino's face. After that, he frowned deeply and covered his mouth with his hand.

“Honestly, you...”

“What?! Are you embarrassed? So Tori gets embarrassed too-”

His teasing was cut off. Hatori quickly pulled Yoshino's face to his and began devouring his lips; then he licked his tongue for a second.

“.....!”

This sent shivers through Yoshino and almost made him sigh sweetly, so he quickly covered his mouth with his hands. After Hatori pulled away and licked his own lips, he muttered his own irrelevant thoughts.

“Omelet was too sweet, huh?”

“You...!”

“Let me correct you on one thing, though. I'm more like the wife. Who do you think does the house chores in this place?”

“I was giving you a simile!”

Had Hatori kissed him just now as revenge or something rather than protesting by saying he hadn't been embarrassed?

“I'm leaving. Be a good boy.”

As Yoshino sulked, Hatori tapped Yoshino's head and left. Yoshino pouted his lips. He could still feel the sensation of the kiss and muttered to hide his embarrassment.

“Geez, he's such a workaholic...”

From the sound of his own voice, he noticed that he sounded disappointed because he had been looking forward to the trip. Feeling a little embarrassed because of this, he looked around his home, deciding it needed a clean up after the crunch time. But it looked like it wasn't necessary since it was already tidy everywhere. The dishes he had just used to eat with were already washed as well and there were side dishes prepared inside the hotpot and refrigerator. On top of the dinning table lay a supply of Yoshino's favorite sweets.

“Oh, he did the laundry for me too...”

The laundry was neatly folded and stacked in a pile on top of the sofa and exactly how he wanted it.

He's too sweet to me...

It was good that Hatori did everything before Yoshino made fun of him.



A person can't be independent when he is sick, right?

“Huh? This is.....”

A large envelope about A4 size was hidden next to the laundry. Yoshino picked it up, looked at it, and saw Kadokawa Shoten's Log printed on the front. But Yoshino didn't remember placing the envelope there himself. So that meant Hatori had forgotten it.

If he needs this for work, he'll be in trouble if he doesn't have it, won't he?

Quickly, he tried to call Hatori's cellphone, but reached voice mail. Perhaps, he was already on the subway? Having no other choice, Yoshino decided to call the editing department. He dialed the number from the telephone book, since he usually never called there and didn't remember it from memory, and picked up the phone receiver. Because not many people knew Yoshino's true identity, he usually called Hatori's cellphone when he had some business to take care of. As he listened to the repetitive mechanical ringing sound, he suddenly remembered something.

Ah, he said he was going to the company, but today is Saturday.

On top of that, it was the weekend immediately after the approval of the manuscript. He didn't think there would be people in the editing department. Right when he was about to hang up, the ringing sound stopped, and he heard a familiar voice.

“Emerald Editing Department.”

“Ah! Umm, this is Yoshino.”

He was surprised that editor-in-chief Takano answered the phone even though it was a non working day. He couldn't help but think that he should be resting at least the weekend after the approval.

“Ah, Yoshino-san. This is Takano. I'm glad to see you've woken up. How are you feeling?”

“I'm fine now. I'm sorry I caused you trouble. Please give my thanks to Onodera-san as well.”

He took this good opportunity to thank Takano. Collapsing at the company must have caused a lot of trouble for Takano and Onodera.

“No, I'm the one who is sorry for asking such a big favor from you. I'm relieved to see you're well now. By the way, how may I help you today? If you need Hatori, he's not here yet.”

“Ah, well, Hatori was just here at my place, but he forgot something, so I thought I should let him know. I can't reach his cellphone since he's probably on the subway right now, so I called here...”

Takano immediately understood when Yoshino summarized the situation. Takano asked him an easy to answer question, because Yoshino wasn't good at explaining things or answering things.

“I see. What did he forget?”

“Looks like some kind of documents. They're inside an envelope, so I don't know what's inside. If it's something you need for today, I could bring it over there.”

“What are you saying? You're recovering, Yoshino-san. Hatori said he was going to come to work tomorrow as well, so if you send it to us through the pick-up home delivery, we'll get it in time.”

“Eh? He's going to work tomorrow, too!?” Yoshino raised his voice, surprised by what Takano had said. Even though Yoshino had been asleep with a cold, that was still the day they were supposed to go on a trip. Yoshino was shaking with anger, because judging from what Takano had said, it seemed that Hatori had already made plans to go to work.

“He didn't tell you that? Yesterday and the day before yesterday he took the days off, so his work has piled up.”

“Days off...?”

What slipped out of Takano's mouth, caught Yoshino off guard. He couldn't believe that a workaholic like Hatori would take days off. As far as Yoshino knew, Hatori had never taken any days off from work no matter how sick he felt.

“Yes. He said he was worried, so he was going to stay with you until your fever went down, Yoshino-san.”

“Is that true?”

“...Ah, I'm sorry, please pretend you didn't hear this just now. He forced me to keep quiet about this,” Takano softly responded to Yoshino, who was trying to further pursue the matter.

“Eh? Keep quiet? Hatori said that?”

“Anyway, I will notify Hatori when he comes in. Yoshino-san, please get some

rest. Keep doing your best starting tomorrow. I look forward to your next work.”

“I- I’ll do my best.”

“Then, excuse me.”

“Ah, yes.”

Takano hung up without giving Yoshino a moment to let the information sink in. A robotic beeping tone fruitlessly echoed into his ear. As Yoshino put back the phone receiver, his shoulders fell, and he hung his head down in self-hatred.

...It was my fault...

The reason Hatori looked tired and couldn't go on the trip was his fault. Because Hatori had taken care of him while Yoshino was sick, his work had piled up so much that he had to work on a day off. On top of that, Hatori didn't tell him the truth because he probably didn't want to worry him. The fact that he forced Takano to keep quiet about this meant he planned on keeping this a secret.

But I...

He had verbally abused Hatori because he said that he wouldn't go on the trip. Hatori didn't even say anything rude back to Yoshino and just told him to take care of himself.

“I knew it. I'm so worthless...”

Never mind properly thanking Hatori for taking care of him, Yoshino had not even said anything considerate to him. Hatori was too sweet to him even for them being friends. That was because Hatori's primary role was to be his childhood friend and lover, not his “mother”.

“.....”

Overwhelmed with regret, Yoshino firmly bit down on his lip. It didn't seem like he was going to get over how careless he had been any time soon.

「CHAPTER 9」

If he was going to repay Hatori with anything, it was to do his work diligently. That was the only thing he could do right now. With that thought in mind, he concentrated and because of that, finished his upcoming plot. It was easily given the OK.

Then, he started on the storyboard for the plot. He worked on the storyboard more smoothly than usual, so surely he had good progress with it than how it was in his previous schedule. This miraculous schedule didn't happen many times in a year, but finishing with extra time to spare surely put both his mind and body at ease.

I have to contact my assistants soon and give them their next agenda.

Yoshino thought, and looked at the calendar nearby as he tried to figure out the plan.

“Lets see...I feel like the next crunch time will be from here to here...But, the finished work to give to my assistants is...”

Presently, he had three regular assistants, with Yanase being at the top, and if he didn't have enough people to help out, he had one more assistant to call.

However, that didn't mean that all of them belonged only to Yoshino, so if they had already made plans with other authors, they wouldn't come. So even if they saw the work plan, he always directly contacted his assistants since it was necessary to make sure they were following his schedule and everybody was on the same page.

...I need to contact Yuu.

He wanted to thank Yanase for his previous work and to make peace with him once and for all. Yanase was his dear friend, so he didn't want them to drift apart from such a misunderstanding. He thought that, but he couldn't quite find the opportunity to do this. Even when they fought when they were students, it was inevitable that they were going to see each other the next morning in school, so there was a time slot to apologize, but now, he couldn't see them talking if he didn't willingly contact Yanase himself. He thought about texting him, but he couldn't deny that it will come out cold, because it's hard to be clear through that. He felt like he couldn't express his feelings too well, and picking the right words for the situation was not his forte.

I should call him, but how do I start the conversation...?

As he hesitated about what to do, his home phone rang. Perhaps Hatori was calling him at this time, just check that he sent the envelope throughout home delivery service.

“Yes, this is Yoshino – “

“Chiaki? It's me.”

He had picked up the phone without checking the number on the display screen, so his heart leapt when he heard that voice. He wasn't mentally prepared, so he had difficulty replying.

“Yu- Yuu, umm...it's been a while.”

On the other side of the line was a sign that Yanase was appalled at Yoshino's stupid reply.

“It hasn't been a while. What will the next assistant do? We can't form this schedule if you don't contact them.”

He felt relieved that Yanase spoke like he always did and tried to not let his happiness show as he chose his words.

“Ah, sorry, I was going to contact them today.”

“We're starting somewhere around next weekend as usual?”

“Ye- yeah. I look forward to working with you.”

He still felt very awkward, so his word choice came out too polite.

“What are we strangers now? That's not nice.”

“No, um...Thanks for the other day. We were saved once you showed up.”

“You're welcome.”

“I figured I'm useless if you're not here Yuu. I don't know what to do. Oh, but you knew I was drawing at the company?”

Suddenly, he remembered that time and only asked now. He wasn't even thinking at that time because he had been panicking, but where in the world did Yanase hear that he was in a mess? Yoshino wondered until Yanase gave him a simple explanation.

“Hatori called me. He said to come help you, because you guys were in a tight spot.”

“Tori did?”

Hatori hadn't said a word to him about this. Now that he thought about it, Hatori

was the only other person besides Yoshino who contacted Yanase, so how did Yoshino not realize this before?

He planned on hiding this too?

Yoshino was happy that Hatori worried about him, but not telling him anything was a little depressing. They weren't children, so he wanted them to communicate properly.

"I waited for you to contact me, though."

"S-sorry..."

He shrugged his shoulders at Yanase who sounded annoyed about this.

"Anyway, I'm sorry too, for sulking. But you should make it up to me for ditching me at the onsen."

"I know. We can go to your favorite onsen next time, Yuu."

"Then let's go to Yufuin. Just the two of us, of course."

"Eh? Not with Tori?"

He panicked, remembering the words Hatori had told him before: *"Promise that you'll never go out with him anymore, where it's just the two of you alone."*

Yoshino had agreed to that obviously jealous-sounding order. It was a situation that happened because of a situation, but he didn't want to break his promises unless they were deadlines.

"Absolutely not. As if I'd go with such a work fanatic."

"B- but..."

"Anyway, this is a promise. Then, contact me when you figure out where your manuscript is going," Yanase said just what he wanted to say and quickly hung up the phone.

"Wai-wait... Yuu! Listen to what others have to say...!"

It was useless to talk into the disconnected phone receiver, but he couldn't help complaining at how one-sided their conversation had been.

"Honestly, he's so selfish and does everything his own way..."

He was dumbstruck but glad that he had patched things up with Yanase for now. Relieved, he started working on the storyboard again. He was to go on a business meeting with Hatori in the evening, so he had to have at least a rough idea by the time he left the

house. With a small load off his shoulders, Yoshino decided to concentrate on the storyboard.

* * * *

As soon as he finished the storyboard he put it into a file folder and left his home to go meet Hatori for their business meeting. The place he was heading to was the shop they often used in the past to have their business meetings. When he opened the door of the shop that read “kissaten” rather than “café”, a ringing sound of a bell resonated. There wasn't a single person inside the shop today as well. It seemed that people showed up at night to get their intake of alcohol, but during the day, their favorite manager made coffee as a hobby.

“Welcome.”

Relieved at the same, calm tone of voice of the manager, he ordered without looking at the menu.

“Lets see, one hot cafe au lait.”

“Certainly. Please wait a moment.”

The reason Yoshino had stopped coming so frequently to this shop was because when they had their business meeting here, Hatori had suddenly kissed him.

Yoshino had made a huge racket because of this, but neither the manager nor the part-time clerk showed any reaction to this, however, Yoshino had still been embarrassed. Because he felt awkward, he had stopped coming here, but he figured that they would eventually forgot about this so starting last month he began to come here again. He had tried to visit several other shops, but none of them were as relaxing and quiet as this one and none of them had tables as wide and useful as the ones in here.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting. Here is your cafe au lait.”

A nice smell came from the cup the part-time clerk was carrying. Yoshino liked black coffee, but part of him thought it was bad for his recovery. But as he sipped his cafe au lait, he sat in his usual seat and reviewed his storyboard until Hatori finally arrived.

“Did you make progress with the storyboard?”

As usual, the first thing he said had to do with work.

“Yeah. But there's a part that worries me a little, so I want to talk it over with you.”

“I see. Ah, I'm sorry, I'll have a blended coffee, please. And a clubhouse sandwich.”

“Certainly.”

“What, you didn't eat?”

“I missed lunch because I was in a conference since morning. We can do this as I eat, right?”

“Sure, but I think we can do this after you've finished eating.”

“That's wasting time. Show me the storyboard. How much progress have you made?”

“I finished it all.”

“...How in the world did that happen? You're fast this time.”

Hatori sounded suspicious as he took the storyboard packet from Yoshino.

“E- even I can finish something when it has to be done!”

“True. I'm going to try reading this for now. We'll talk after.”

With that said, Hatori laid the storyboard on the table and held a red pen in one hand, entering reading mode. When Hatori was like this, he wouldn't listen no matter what was being said to him.

“.....Nice working with you.....,” Yoshino muttered and sipped his now rather cool cafe au lait.

* * * *

“Then start drawing from that material. I think you should adjust the dialogue, but after you try drawing it, we need to see how it's balancing out.”

“Understood...that reminds me, do you know who Yuu likes?”

As he wrote down the suggestions he got from Hatori on the storyboard, he inadvertently asked this.

“...Why do you want to know that?”

“Actually, Nozomi-chan likes Yuu. Never noticed it, right?”

“And so?”

“Well, it bugs me. What do you think we should do?”

“How should I know? You're kind of poking your nose into other people's business.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

When he looked at Nozomi, who seemed so innocently in love, it made him want to help her out. It was probably unnecessary to do so, but he wanted to do something for her because, who knows, maybe they will become happy thanks to him initiating their relationship.

“I think that even Yanase will hate it if you poke your nose into his business.”

“Eh? Why is that?”

“...Because.”

Hatori gave a vague answer and sipped the remainder of his coffee. Then, looking at his wristwatch, Hatori said apologetically.

“Sorry. It'll be bad if I don't go soon.”

“Eh? Already? You're very busy today.”

“I have my hands full with conferences and business meetings. If I have time, I planned on coming to your place to see how everything is going, but at the moment, it doesn't seem likely that I can come.”

“You're that busy now?”

“There are some things to take care of about the making of the drama. Honestly, it's a pain, but I can't do anything about it because there isn't anyone else who can do this.”

“I see...”

Hatori not being able to come meant he wouldn't be able to eat Hatori's cooking. He was immediately disappointed, realizing that he would have a hard time finding something to eat for dinner.

Come on, this makes it seem like I only care about the food!

He scolded himself for having thoughts only focused on dinner. Of course he was also sad that he wouldn't see the person who cooks the dinner. But it was a big deal because when Hatori came, he always brought food and other provisions. With that

excuse in mind, Yoshino saw Hatori place a paper bag, which he had brought in with him, on top of the table.

“Here, take this home with you.”

“What's this?”

“Your dinner tonight. I brought this instead because I can't come to your place. I bought that dish at the department store on my way here, but I made the onigiri and the omelet.”

It seemed that the contents inside the bag were provisions for Yoshino. When he looked inside, he recognized the tupperware.

“Uwa, thank you! This really saves me!”

If the omelet was not a sweet roll with dashi prepared by Hatori, he didn't care for eating it. Onigiri was more delicious prepared by hand than from the convenience store so he felt rather relieved.

“I bet you were going to eat instant noodles today again, right? It's not unreasonable to ask you to cook your own food, so stop eating that. It's okay to eat sometimes, but if you eat that everyday you won't get all the right nutrients.”

“Whaaat? Then what should I eat?”

“Frozen meals. All you have to do is just heat them in the microwave.”

“Those are heavy to bring home with me.”

Hatori's lip twitched when Yoshino complained.

“You know, those vegetables I bought were heavy too.”

“Urgh...sorry...”

“Then I'll be going. I think you did especially well on the storyboard this time. I'm looking forward to it, so do your best.”

Hatori encouraged Yoshino and then left the cafe in a hurry.

「CHAPTER 10」

After safely finishing the storyboard, he began drawing immediately. This time, he was ahead of schedule since his work was going smoothly. After he drew most of the manuscript, he called up his assistants, but Yanase also came and acted as usual. Because they had extra time, Yanase was training the other assistants with their techniques. Remembering the conversation the other day, Yoshino observed them and saw that Nozomi was gazing at Yanase with loving eyes.

She really does like Yuu...

He began feeling bittersweet the more he watched her innocent behavior.

“...-sei, Sensei, are you listening?”

“Eh? What?”

“I knew it, you're not listening. I said, I finished drawing in the minor characters in this manuscript I'm holding, so what should I do next?”

“Oh, really? Then how about we take a break for a while? It's perfect timing to do it now. Everyone should take a break after finishing some part of their work.”

“Oookay.”

“Oh, yes. Let's have a tea break with the cake Nozomi-chan brought us. Is everyone okay with coffee instead of black tea?” Yoshino said as he wiped the tip of his pen, put it down, and quickly, but making sure not to spill, closed the ink jar. This was the appropriate time to take a break. Work effectiveness would increase that way.

“I'll make coffee.”

Without waiting for an answer, Yanase got up, and Yoshino called after him.

“Thanks for that. There are new flavors on that shelf, so use your favorite.”

“Mhm, okay.”

After Yanase looked at the coffee beans, he began to drip the coffee beans in the usual manner. Yanase wasn't thinking of Yoshino and the others as he did this. He was picky about coffee (actually, picky about all food in general), so he didn't want to let Yoshino and the other assistants to get in his way. When he was busy, he made do with instant coffee and take-out food for meals, but when he had time, he cooked his meals. As Yanase passed around the cups of freshly made coffee, he inadvertently spoke.

“Ah, that reminds me. I started working as a temp for Ijuin-sensei.”

“Ijuin-sensei? Do you mean *the* Ijuin Kyo?”

“Yeah. That Ijuin-sensei.”

“Eh-!? Seriously?” Yoshino inadvertently exclaimed, because he was so surprised. Ijuin Kyo was Yoshino's favorite author who wrote “The☆Kan”. He was a popular manga artist who had his books serialized with many publishers. But a rumor went around from his assistants that because he was so busy, working for him was quite “cruel”. A manga artist's crunch time could more or less be called tremendous, but to call it cruel was too much. What kind of hell lay before you once you entered that place?

“Yup. His assistants asked me to. It seems that the assistants got into a fight or something and the ones who worked as regulars quit. Right now, only one newbie, who can't seem to draw backgrounds, is left.”

“Wow! That's terrible... It'll be hard to find immediate assistants.”

In a sense, it was hard to look for assistants who were specialists in a particular technique and who had extra time in their schedule. It was probably especially virtually impossible to find a type of person whom a picky author such as Ijuin approved of.

There are two types of assistants: The first type is in the process of becoming a professional manga artist, polishing and studying their techniques. They are the types who help out the already professional manga artists. The other type is called professional assistants who make their living doing assistant jobs as their specialty. This was Yanase's case. One way to find assistants is to put up a recruitment announcement in the magazine you publish and on your official homepage. With this, you have a chance of recruiting an assistant. Other assistants can be found through people you know, and the editor will ask them if they would like to contribute to help. But there was not enough time for that right now. After lurking around and using personal connections, talk of Yanase must have come up.

“After they searched everywhere, they came to me. They said I don't have to sign with them, so I went there to give it a try this month.”

“Ohhh. I see. Ah, but that's really good!”

“Jealous?” Yanase smiled proudly at Yoshino, who was in agony.

“Of course I'm jealous! I want to be his assistant too! I want to see his new

manuscript for ‘The☆Kan’!!”

“What's there for you to do, Chiaki? You need to draw your own manuscript.”

But Yoshino did not back down even though Yanase had a very good point.

“Th- then, get him to sign one of his comics for me!”

He had been half-joking when he said he wanted to go work for Ijuin as an assistant, but him being a fan and wanting Ijuin's signature was true. One time, Ijuin had a book signing, but Yoshino had to give up on going because the place was kind of far away, and the time conflicted with his schedule. When the signing had been in Tokyo, Yoshino had gone behind Hatori's back and stood in line there.

“Don't be crazy. I want it myself, but I can't ask something like that. Even if I'm just temporarily working there, I'm still going there to work.”

“That's true...”

Yanase was being reasonable. Even Yoshino himself would probably think badly of an assistant who had just started working for him and then suddenly asked for an autograph. It wasn't like Yoshino wouldn't be happy if that assistant said she was his fan, but when he called up assistants, it meant the deadline was fast approaching and a lot of work had to be done.

“Hatori...would kill you if you ask him to do that. Why don't you try asking the editor-in-chief?”

“That's impossible. He would refuse to do it...”

Yoshino couldn't ask such a bold request. For starters, he felt it would be a small problem for his image if people found out that the delicate and shy, shoujo manga artist “Yoshikawa Chiharu” liked a big-boned shounen manga artist.

“Then give up.”

“Damn it... Ijuin-sensei, won't you come to a signing one more time? To Tokyo, no, even Nagoya would be fine. I'll find time to go there.”

An assistant muttered with admiration as she watched the conversation between Yoshino and Yanase.

“Sensei really likes “The☆Kan”, doesn't he?”

“But it's so interesting! I definitely can't draw like that!!”

“I'd be surprised if you drew that kind of manga, sensei. Every artist has their own style.”

“When you put it that way, you may be right. You can't always have fun when you draw.”

Yoshino would read any type of manga. But he was a shoujo manga artist, and thought the world he created in his comics was the most accurate representation of shoujo. He wasn't good at drawing other genre and that was precisely why he was attracted to those other genre of comics.

“Well, the least I can do is tell you about my adventures over there, so look forward to it as you do your own work.”

“Uwa! I can't wait!”

Yanase's words urged Yoshino to work, and he was glad that he worked unusually fast on his manuscript.

* * * *

“Good work~”

“Good work. Let's do well again tomorrow.”

“Okay~ But sensei, please complete all your assignments too.”

“Ha ha...I'll try...”

Hearing these stern words, Yoshino forced a smile and saw off the assistants as they went home. The only one left out of the assistants was Yanase.

Is now a good time to talk about the trip...?

He wanted to suggest that they should include Hatori with them but he was nervous to say this because he felt like the atmosphere between them today was extremely awkward. Watching Yanase's complexion, Yoshino nervously began to speak.

“He- hey, Yuu. About the trip...”

“Yeah, when will we go? If Ijuin-sensei has some stuff for me to do, it would be impossible to go soon, but if we go the month after next month I think I will ask him to let me off.”

“Tha- that's not what I mean. Umm...I think we have to invite Tori with us after

all. I feel really bad about what happened last time, so...”

“Which time? That crunch time you almost died in?” Yanase asked with a cold tone of voice; his gaze steady on Yoshino.

“Um...that too, but about the trip, as well...”

Even though Yoshino apologized to Yanase about the trip again right now, Yanase gave him a cold look.

“Chiaki, do you know what I was angry about?”

“What about...? That I suddenly left that night, right?”

He couldn't think of any other reason, but the fact that Yanase had deliberately asked him such a question meant that there was something else that had made Yanase unhappy.

“I'm not angry ‘that you suddenly left’, it pisses me off that you ‘put Hatori before yourself.’”

“H- how do you know about Hatori...?”

At that time, he had excused himself by saying that he was “going to his parent's house”, and flew out of the hotel, so how did Yanase find out that he had gone to Hatori's place?

“How can I not know? It always shows on your face.”

“Urgh...!”

“It also makes me angry when I'm being lied to. But I'm not gonna say any more. I don't like talking on and on about things that already happened.”

“S- sorry.....”

As Yoshino apologized, he couldn't quite understand why Yanase would be this annoyed. But it seemed that Yanase did not want to talk about it any more, so he didn't pursue the question any further. He desperately searched for another topic to talk about.

I feel like there was something I had to say to Yuu...Oh!

As his eyes aimlessness traveled around the room, he suddenly remembered it.

“O- oh yeah! Sa~y, Yuu, how do you feel about Nozomi-chan?”

“Nozomi? That really puny girl? What do you mean by ‘how?’”

Yoshino brought up the topic of the assistant Nozomi, who liked Yanase, and watched Yanase's reaction, but didn't see any particular sign that Yanase cared.

“She's a rather cute, stylish, nice girl, and cooks well, don't you think?”

“So? What are you trying to say?”

“I'm saying Nozomi-chan likes you!” Yoshino told him the truth, and Yanase began to look irritated, but gave Yoshino an unexpected reply.

“I know.”

“What? You know?!...Huh!? She already confessed!?”

Yoshino's eyes widened at Yanase's words. So Yanase was calm around Nozomi after knowing her feelings? If Yoshino were in Yanase's place he would tremble and act unnatural, but this is Yanase we're talking about.

“She didn't.”

“Th- then you heard it from some other girl...?”

“No, not really. But I could just tell somehow.”

“Really? ...So it was that obvious...”

Perhaps Yoshino was slower than he had thought, because he completely hadn't noticed it. Yoshino was amazed with himself, so then Yanase urged him to get to the point.

“And? What about it?”

“You don't have a girlfriend right now, right, Yuu? I think maybe you two should date.”

The moment he said that, Yanase violently put the cup he had been holding back in the saucer. Yoshino jumped in spite of himself because of the harsh clinking sound.

“W- what...?”

He was surprised at how suddenly dangerous the atmosphere had become. On top of that, the words coming out of Yanase's tight-lipped mouth held anger.

“You really are slow.”

“Eh?”

“I like that about you, but right now it annoys me. You don't know why Hatori pisses me off, do you?”

Yoshino just tilted his head to one side, not understanding why Yanase was so obviously acting unhappy. He had a feeling they were going to get into a fight, but did not have a clear reason as to why.

Yoshino had a puzzled look on his face and Yanase was giving him a look of disbelief as he carelessly said, "Cause, I like you, okay?"

".....Hah?"

"I like *you*, Chiaki."

Even though Yanase repeated it, Yoshino didn't comprehend it right away. His mind had gone blank and he couldn't think straight.

"You like me...?"

"Yeah. But let me tell you this, not as a friend or a person. I like you as a lover."

"....."

He thought that perhaps this was some kind of bad joke, but Yanase had a very serious look on his face. He remembered this possibility of Yanase liking him. Back then he had brushed it off, but could it be that he had been right?

".....I want to make sure of one thing, though."

"What?"

"Do you really not like Hatori?" Yoshino asked, still confused.

"Didn't I already tell you that I don't? Why are you so obsessed with that idea?"

Yanase replied to him unpleasantly.

"Ca- cause....."

"Cause what?"

"Because I accidentally saw you and Hatori kissing on that rainy day one time!"

It was awkward to confess what he had seen, but he was left with no other choice but to be honest. After Yoshino quickly blurted that out, Yanase looked puzzled.

"Kissing? With him? Me?"

"Y- you see, you two were talking about something behind the Marukawa building and then weren't you doing that...?"

Thinking that perhaps Yanase had forgotten, Yoshino tried his best to explain. It seemed that Yanase remembered what had happened that time but gave out an exasperated sigh.

"Yeah, we were just arguing about you, Chiaki. Hatori grabbed me by the collar, so it must have looked that way."

"Oh, so that's what it was....."

“Chiaki, seriously, don't imagine such disgusting things. It gives me goose bumps,” Yanase said and rolled up his sleeve. He really did have goose bumps on his arm. One of Yoshino's questions was solved, but then another question popped into his head. Since Yanase said he liked men, it meant he was aware of the “roles”.

“He- hey, Yuu, are you a seme or a uke?”

Even Yoshino had to admit that this was an obscene question to ask upfront.

Yanase sneered, “Manga has too much of a bad influence on you. If you're gonna ask that, ask if I'm the cat or the dog.But anyway, doesn't it gross you out that I told you I like you?” Yanase said with a smile. which held a tinge of self-ridicule. Yoshino quickly waved his hand in denial.

“Eh? No, not really. It doesn't gross me out.....”

“You don't have to pretend. Tell me your honest opinion.”

“I'm not pretending! In fact, I like you, Yuu and...”

His eyes shifting back and forth, Yoshino searched for words, but when his eyes landed on the sliding glass door, his gaze locked with Hatori's. It appeared that Hatori was standing on the other side of the glass door.

W-why now...? Oh yeah, he said he was gonna come pick up the cover of the manuscript...

Hatori entered the room, dropped some provisions he was holding in front of Yoshino, put the finished cover of the manuscript into a file folder and turned on his heel to go.

“I'll take care of this. I'll come pick up the monochrome part of the manuscript the day after tomorrow.”

“Eh? Eh? Eh?!”

Without giving Yoshino time to stop him, Hatori quickly left. Yoshino felt flustered because he could not keep up with the situation around him, and then Yanase asked him straight out, “Does it mean I can take your ‘like’ to be the same as mine?”

“Eh? Ah! No...! How to say this...I think of you as a dear friend, Yuu. I've never thought about having any romantic feelings or anything like that towards you before...Oh!”

As Yoshino talked, he realized that Hatori had left angrily because he probably

had misunderstood what Yoshino meant when he said he “likes” Yuu.

...This is seriously bad.

If Hatori misunderstood like Yoshino thought he did, it meant that Yoshino was being suspected of cheating. While Yoshino thought deeply about this, Yanase began to get ready to leave.

“If you've never thought about it, then think about it. I'll give you some time. Your head is probably full with the manuscript right now anyway. I'm gonna go now. See you tomorrow, then.”

Yanase left. Acting as usual after confessing was not something Yoshino thought Yanase would do.

“...Wh- what the hell!?”

Left all alone, Yoshino yelled out his irritation towards the door from which Yanase left a moment ago.

「CHAPTER 11」

Managing to somehow finish the manuscript, Yoshino could relax as he saw off the motorbike delivery service.

“Why am I so useless...”

He was doing great for a while, so he expected for this to be the fastest he's ever worked, but in the end, he just barely finished the manuscript once again. This time, the biggest reason for this had been because of Yanase's confession. Yoshino had spent all his time deeply thinking about it and didn't do as much work as he had meant to do.

I suck for not being able to separate private matters from work during such times.

He had gone to the workshop without completing his work and wondering whether Yanase's confession was a fact. He was thinking that perhaps the confession had been a bad dream or some sort of joke, but as he left the workshop, Yanase reminded him 'Make sure to think it over' and this confirmed that it really had happened. The manuscript not being complete was a problem he had to face.

But before that....

It was true that he was worried about the thing with Yanase, but first he wanted to solve the misunderstanding he had with Hatori. He didn't know whether Hatori was sulking or angry, but when Hatori was in a bad mood he always secluded himself from everyone, kept everything to himself and just cleaned.

Yoshino had to clear up this misunderstanding before Hatori became deadlocked. Determined to do just that, Yoshino decided to send Hatori a text message. He had to be the one to start the conversation otherwise this issue would just remain unsettled. Being the coward he was, Yoshino had to pursue Hatori right away or else he would get cold feet and back out from it all.

“Let's see: 'I need to tell you something, so I'll be waiting at your place. Come straight home when you're done with work.' Is this okay? Alright, send.”

The screen on his cellphone changed to signify that the message had been sent. Yoshino hoped that Hatori would come home from work by the end of the day.

Anyways, I have to go to his place.

If he sat around at home like this, his resolve would waver. He had to strike while

the iron was still hot, as they say. That's why Yoshino immediately headed towards Hatori's place. When he reached the apartment complex, which took him about fifteen minutes on foot, the sun had completely set, and it had become dark out. He entered Hatori's apartment with the spare key and muttered as he turned on the lights inside the dark room.

“Well, of course he's not home yet.”

Being familiar with the place, he went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Sure enough, there was a row of light beer. He took one for himself and migrated towards the sofa as he pulled the tab to open the can.

“Haa-! A can of this after work is the best!”

He talked to himself, deliberately attempting to cheer himself up because he wanted to get rid of his nervousness. Just then, the cellphone in his butt pocket vibrated.

“Oho!”

He almost spilled the beer as he jumped up from surprise.

My phone was in there the whole time?

He quickly set down the can on the table and took out his phone from his pocket. When he opened it and looked, he saw that he had one message.

“Is it Tori?”

Just as he thought, it was a reply from Hatori. 'I just left the office' it read. It was brief. How fitting of Hatori. This meant that he would return in an hour. Then suddenly the home phone rang. As Yoshino wondered whether he should answer it, it switched to the answering machine, and the fax began to run.

“What? A fax?”

Thinking it would end soon, Yoshino continued to sit on the sofa, drinking light beer and watching t.v., but eventually turned around to suspiciously look towards the sound of the never-ending printer.

“Isn't that too much?”

Since the fax wouldn't stop, Yoshino picked up the papers that the fax machine spit out and apologetically looked at them without permission.

“What? Umm...I received the design, so I will forward it as I was told'...This is from the editing department!”

The papers looked like they contained the special-feature article, which was to be issued in the upcoming magazine. He gathered the scattered papers and placed them on the dining table.

Does he plan on working even at home...?

He knew Hatori was busy, but he ought to rest when he came home. If Hatori worked himself so much to the point of destroying his health, he would lose everything.

“Well, whatever. I'm gonna go take a bath.”

The fact that Hatori had left the office just a while ago, meant he won't be back for nearly one hour. Yoshino concluded that, located his spare change of clothes, which he kept here, and headed towards the bathroom.

* * * *

“-ey, Yoshino. Yoshino!”

“Hm...?”

“I said get up.”

Yoshino raised his heavy eyelids to the sound of his name being repeated. After blinking several times, his eyes traveled around the room and stopped at Hatori who was looking down at him. Hatori's face twitched.

“Ah...welcome back...,” Yoshino said with a yawn and Hatori further furrowed his brow.

“You have some nerve. Sleeping with that idiotic look on your face after calling a person to come meet you...”

“Well...sorry, sorry. I just got a little sleepy.”

Yoshino quickly sat up, and gave a wry smile as he straightened himself. He had another light beer after taking a bath and ended up falling asleep like that on the sofa. He was still tired from the crunch time, but somehow Hatori's apartment relaxed him. This was most likely because everything was always properly organized here and made him feel at home. Besides, he also felt that it was unnecessary to do work when he was here. Hatori took off his suit jacket and sat down beside Yoshino.

“So, what did you need to tell me?”

Hatori got straight to the point and this made Yoshino nervous again.

“Ah, well it's, umm...why don't you take a bath first? The bath is full.”

“Don't forestall; get to the point. You said you had something to tell me, so I stopped my work and came here.”

“I'm- I'm sorry...”

The mountain of papers from the fax was probably what Hatori had planned on finishing at the office. Thinking where he should begin, Yoshino couldn't straighten out his thoughts, because he had just woken up. As Yoshino searched for the words to say, Hatori began to speak first.

“...I kind of know what you want to say.”

“Eh?”

“You want to end this, right? Our relationship.”

Hearing this out in the open, Yoshino knew right away that his fear had not been in vain. It seemed that Hatori had misunderstood after all.

“Not exactly, I...”

“Don't play dumb. You came here today to tell me that, didn't you? Well, of course it must have been hard for you to tell me that sooner.”

“I told you you're wrong!”

“Don't worry about it. It's not like you,” Hatori said, a smile of a little bit of self-ridicule played on his lips. Yoshino furiously denied it, but it seemed that nothing he said could reach Hatori's heart anymore. He had to somehow clear up this misunderstanding, but words weren't going to do anything, because Hatori had become stubborn.

“How am I wrong? It's true that you're forcing yourself even right now, isn't it?”

“.....!”

Yoshino wouldn't quite say that he wasn't forcing himself. But even if he was forcing himself, it wasn't like he was doing this because he had no choice. Yoshino was pushing himself because it was something that he had decided to do himself.

“You were straight from the start, weren't you? You've dated girls until now so your relationship with me is unnatural. You hoped that perhaps this would end someday.”

“Don't say that it's unnatural! It's my own choice that I-”

“I know that,” Hatori quietly interrupted. Hatori's pained smile irritated Yoshino.

“You know what...? What do you know about me!?”

“We grew up together as childhood friends, so of course you're nice to me. I pushed my feelings on you and confused you.”

“What are you saying, Tori...”

“You didn't even realize that you felt sorry for me. Besides, we practically have nothing to talk about other than work. It's much more fun for you to be with Yanase than to talk to me, isn't it?”

“That's...”

It was fun to talk to Yanase because they shared the same hobbies. Yoshino himself had said that, but he had just been letting out his anger back then. The truth was that he wanted to talk to Hatori; talk about things other than work. He would be fine if they could share their opinions on books and T.V. dramas, or even just talk about a cat they happened to see during shopping. Yoshino wanted to say that he wanted to talk some more about silly things like they had done in the past.

“I thought about bringing this up sooner, but I'm a coward. I was scared of confronting you, so I ran away,” Hatori spoke with self-contemplation and had a small smile of self-ridicule. Hatori's words were facts. However, they were spoken from only one perspective.

How do you think I feel...?

Unable to suppress his anger, Yoshino bit his lip. But it seemed that Hatori mistook Yoshino's silence as an agreement with what he had said.

“I'm ready. You should hurry up and end it with me.”

Yoshino had enough with the way Hatori was acting; being all calm even while talking about breaking up.

“Oh my god, *shut up!* That's not it at all!!”

“Yo- Yoshino...?”

Hatori's good-looking face changed to a surprised expression when Yoshino suddenly blustered that out. He finally showered the silent Hatori with questions.

“You think I would fuck a man out of pity or because I was confused!? Why would I force myself to keep kissing someone I thought of as only a childhood friend? Especially when I'm the so-called 'straight'! You think I'll get hard for men other than

you!?”

“N- no...”

“This is clearly my fault, too, but if you were thinking about this the whole time, then you should have just spit this stuff out! Don't get all mopey and selfishly decide people's feelings on your own!”

“You-”

“So...d-do you get it?”

“Ye- yeah...”

Perhaps being taken aback by Yoshino's angry outburst, Hatori nodded dumbfounded. Yoshino felt choked, because he had said everything in one breath. His shoulders heaving, Yoshino slowly began to calm down.

...Was that okay.....?

Although Yoshino had dropped a hint, was it enough to convince Hatori? He had tried to be clear, but it was probably not clear enough. His face began to feel hot with embarrassment as he thought about what he had said. From the very start he had not wanted to part with Hatori, so that's why he now wholeheartedly tried to prevent him from leaving. Even when they slept together, he endured his embarrassment and accepted it, but in his heart, he had not once felt disgusted. Although he felt embarrassed to expose all of himself, he rather liked the comfort of body heat and the pleasantness of being touched.

Uwa...I think I like Tori more than I've thought...

Yoshino felt flustered inside when he thought of something as major as this. Then Hatori asked him with a serious look on his face.

“Yoshino, can I think of that as your confession?”

He sounded somewhat cautious but looked rather happy.

“...Tch, shut up! You're a shoujo manga editor, so what do you think!?”

“Hey, watch it.”

Yoshino hurled a cushion he had been resting on up until now and also hurled the words he had told Hatori before. However, seeing that Yoshino himself was poor at reading the atmosphere, he felt like he had no right to expect Hatori to know just because he was a shoujo manga editor. But Yoshino couldn't afford to think calmly right now.



God, I'm such an idiot!

Unable to stand his own embarrassing remark, Yoshino suddenly got up off the sofa.

“Where are you going?”

“To the balcony to cool my head!”

It wasn't his head that needed cooling but more like his flushed face, however, he said that because he didn't want it to seem like he was embarrassed because of what he had said. He made towards the glass balcony, but before he could open the curtain, Hatori grabbed him. Hatori hugged him from behind, his arms around Yoshino's waist.

“What... are you doing...?”

“You're about to stand in the cold night wind, what will you do if you catch a cold?”

“I won't! Let go!”

Yoshino tried to get away so that Hatori wouldn't discover that he was trembling, but there was nothing he could do because Hatori had grabbed him. He felt the body heat on his back, and it made his already hammering heart pound further.

“Your heart is beating fast.”

His violent heartbeat was discovered when Hatori pressed himself to Yoshino's chest. Trying to somehow cover this up, Yoshino frantically gave an excuse.

“Tha- that's cause you are doing strange things all of a sudden!”

“I'm not doing anything yet.”

“Yet!? Just what are you thinking to do here!?”

“I think I need to meet up to your expectations.”

From behind, Hatori traced the outline of Yoshino's body with his hand as he announced that. Because he had just come out from the bath he was wearing only a thin t-shirt, so he could clearly feel the touch of Hatori's fingers.

“Wait...stop. Stop!! Ah, hey, just where are you touching!?”

Hatori rubbed him until Yoshino stretched out the waistband on his shorts as far as it would go. He immediately became aware of what was happening to him down there. The lower center of Yoshino's body had begun to heat up even when he just thought about being touched down there.

“I bet you're sorry for saying such provoking things.”

“Not really.....Ah!”

Hatori pressed his lips on the nape of Yoshino's neck and rubbed along it. It became difficult for Yoshino to talk, because he was trying to suppress his voice so as not to let out a strange cry.

“You smell like my shampoo. You took a shower on purpose and waited for me because you wanted to do it, right?”

“The- there wasn't time to take it at my place...”

Even though this was the reason he gave, it just sounded like he was giving an excuse to get out of this situation. His body trembled sweetly as he said stop.

“It's been a while. Don't run away.”

“I'm not running away! Think of where you are!”

“I see. But how can I stop now?” Hatori whispered these cruel words and pressed his heat against Yoshino from behind.

“.....!”

Yoshino swallowed. That part of Hatori had already become hard and excited.

“After you take care of this, I'll take you over to the bed.”

A shiver went down Yoshino's spine at the sound of Hatori's voice mixed with heated breath. Usually, Hatori's voice was stiff and unwavering, but only at a time such as this did it carry sweetness. Yoshino thought it was unfair, but he didn't hate it.

“Turn this way, Chiaki.”

“.....”

Hatori turned him around in his arms. When Yoshino stood there unable to look up because of embarrassment, Hatori scooped up his chin and softly pressed his lips to his.

“Mm.....”

He liked being kissed by Hatori. It was powerful but somehow gentle. Yoshino knew that Hatori was desperately controlling himself. The fact that there was a slight hesitation in Hatori even now when he was in passion meant that Hatori was still in his right mind. Hatori was a stubborn man so he probably didn't fully believe what Yoshino had told him a while ago.

Hatori was getting worried again and will probably try to leave Yoshino. If that happened, Yoshino would just prevent him from leaving again.

“Chiaki, open your mouth.”

“Haa...mm...ngh...”

The moment he parted his lips, Hatori's tongue slipped inside. This forced his mouth to open wider and their tongues intertwine.

“Ngh...fuu.....mm...”

Hatori pressed him to the window behind the closed curtain and the metallic sound of the blinds resonated. Their silhouettes could surely be seen from the outside, but they couldn't turn back now. As they devoured each other's lips, their breaths melted together and their saliva mixed into one. It was hard to breathe, so it wasn't certain which one of them broke the kiss, but when it happened, Yoshino saw that Hatori's cheeks were also slightly flushed. Yoshino licked his wet lips and swallowed.

“...Take care of it? What should I do?” Yoshino asked, even though he already knew the answer.

“You're a man, you know,” he received a cold reply.

He wasn't sure if he was being tested, if there was a leeway out of this. It seemed that he had no choice but to try to read Hatori's thoughts.

“I- I'm not good, so don't complain...”

“I won't.” Hatori quietly laughed.

Yoshino swallowed again, and nervously took hold of Hatori's belt. He unbuckled the clasp and unbuttoned the button on Hatori's slacks. Then, with shaking fingers, he lowered the zipper and took hold of the elastic part on Hatori's underwear. He felt like his violently beating heart was urging him to hurry. He couldn't calm down. Holding his breath, he put his hand inside and touched Hatori's heat.

Wow...

It felt the same as his own, but it was different in heat and size. Although he had seen it many times, he felt a little shy when he actually touched it. However, Yoshino held in his embarrassment and wrapped his fingers around it. It was mortifying to always be the only one being played around with, so he boldly began to move his hand around the mass.



“.....!”

Yoshino's own heart throbbed when he heard Hatori grunt. Yoshino slowly rubbed the surface of the underwear, and it grew harder.

He knew he should do it the way Hatori had done it to him but doing it to a person made him uncomfortable. He nervously pulled out the erection from the underwear and tried to quicken his hand. He paid attention to Hatori's appearance, wondering if he was making him feel any good. Then, Hatori removed his hands from the window and slid them down Yoshino's body.

“Ngh! Wait...!”

“It's unfair for only me to feel good, isn't it?”

“Yeah, but...!”

Hatori rubbed Yoshino's butt and waist and pressed his lips to Yoshino's forehead. Being touched like this made him lose all concentration in his fingers. But Hatori pulled out Yoshino's erection and rubbed his own on top of Yoshino's.

“No...ah, stop that...!”

Before he knew it, this rubbing caused his breathing to intensify and his desire to grow. Immediately, his member grew harder and bigger and his lower regions tingled.

“We would be here all day if I left it all up to you.”

“You said you wouldn't complain...!”

“This isn't complaining. I'm just giving you a hand.”

“That's...some pun...ngh!”

His complaining was cut off by a kiss. When Yoshino tried to break free, Hatori licked all over inside his mouth and this made Yoshino forget about Hatori's reply. As they exchanged this deep kiss, the pace of Hatori's hand intensified. Their tongues grew numb and their erections tingled as they rubbed together.

“Ngh! Ah.....fu.....!”

Both of them became delirious and in heat.

As I thought, there's no way I can do these things with someone else.

He got turned on just as any other man would when he was with a girl, but he had never desired anyone as much as he did the very person now in front of him. This was Hatori, so he wanted to feel closer to him. That was what he thought.

“...Tori.”

“Hm?”

“Thi- this is bad. I- I'm gonna come.”

“Me too,” Hatori laughed lightly and quickened the pace of his hand.

Hatori rubbed him more vigorously, and Yoshino gasped, forgetting the pain because of the final moments of ecstasy.

It chased him. It cornered him.

“Ah, no, aah...AH.....!”

Hatori spurted out his heat as if following Yoshino's erotic eruption. Their hands were stained with warm semen. When he reached climax through masturbation, he immediately calmed down seconds later. But right now, there was no sign of his excitement fading. He wanted Hatori's heat some more.

For the first time, Yoshino said something himself, “...To the bed, right?”

He looked up at Hatori's eyes - the eyes hiding a wild intensity like those of a starved beast.

* * * *

“I can't, no...! I feel strange...!”

Yoshino was losing his senses. The rush of ecstasy just wouldn't stop. No matter how embarrassed he felt, his body tried to chase after the pleasure. Even though he pulled his waist away from the thrusts, his soft insides tightly swallowed the rod and would not let go. Seeing this contradiction, Hatori began harassing Yoshino nonstop.

“You're getting all worked up over me.”

“Ah! ...Don't...blame me....!”

He tightened his arms around Hatori's back as he insulted him. With their faces close together, it wasn't clear which one of them put their lips over the others.

“Ngh...mm...fuu.....”

Hatori's tongue pried its way in and violently rummaged inside Yoshino's mouth. Unable to swallow, saliva ran down the side of Yoshino's lips. He wasn't sad and it didn't hurt, but tears welled up in his eyes, ran down his cheeks, and traveled into Hatori's lips.

The sheets were already wet with their sweat and semen, but they couldn't waste a moment to think about cleaning it up. Up until now – up until he started sleeping with Hatori – he had never had such intense sex. On the contrary, he hadn't even dreamed that he possessed such desire. Even now, he could hardly believe it. But Hatori held him like this, and wanted him so much, that it almost seems like he didn't need anyone else. This scared Yoshino, but also made him happy. When Yoshino imagined being with a girl, his natural instinct was to desire girls. But his lust towards the body of this man was stronger than even that instinct.

When he realized this, his chest grew hot. He got embarrassed and wanted to run away, but at the same time he was deeply touched. It hurt that Hatori was ready to be with him but he had to hide his feelings.

...I don't think my feelings are as strong as his.

However, he decided to be with Hatori because, he was precious to him in his own way. Having Hatori tell Yoshino that he loved him even when Yoshino was spunky, insensitive, crude, and annoying, made Yoshino want to return that same love towards Hatori. At least that was what he thought right now.

“What are you thinking about?”

“...Dunno, what do you think?”

It was too embarrassing to reply honestly and say 'About you', so he played dumb as he gasped for air. Perhaps that offended Hatori, because he frowned and violently thrust in.

“AH! Aah...wait...it's tight...!”

“It's fine if you don't want to say. I'll make you think only about me.”

“Wha... stupid. Don't sound like a dirty old man...AAH!”

Yoshino's whole body was violently being shaken so much that it felt like he was going to break. Yoshino let out a high-pitched cry.

There was no time to scold Hatori for this. Yoshino just dug his fingernails into Hatori's shoulders.

“Ow...! Aahh...AAH...!”

Yoshino vehemently gasped as he felt Hatori's sweet but strong heat churning it up inside him.

I only think about you whether I want to or not!

Even when he worked and even when he didn't work, Hatori was always on his mind. Would he praise him for the storyboard this time? Was he nervous about the deadline? When Yoshino was hungry, he longed for Hatori's cooking, and when he felt lonely, the very first thing he wanted to hear was Hatori's voice. In addition to not being able to lead a proper adult life, he felt lost if Hatori wasn't around.

“...Still thinking about unnecessary things?”

“*Stuuupid*. That would be you! You'll go bald if you worry too much, you know.”

“Wha-.....”

“Whatever, just be quiet!”

“That's my line – “

Yoshino dug his nails into Hatori's shoulders and brought him closer. Then, he covered Hatori's smart mouth with his own lips. Yoshino was pleased to see Hatori open his eyes wide with surprise. He wrapped his legs around Hatori's body as they lay on top of each other. For a moment, Yoshino gloated about outsmarting Hatori, since what he did made Hatori completely lose his self-control.

But in the end, Yoshino was the one crying for mercy.

「CHAPTER 12」

“Yo, Chiaki. I bought strawberry daifuku from Aiya!”

“Seriously? Yes!! I'll go make tea right now.”

Strawberry daifuku from Aiya were unique because their outside was made out of gyūhi and their inside out of fresh strawberries and red bean paste. They were Yoshino's favorite. He was thinking of taking a break soon so this was perfect.

“Huh? Don't you have work today, Yuu?”

“It got postponed, so I came to hang out. I can stay until evening, right? I won't get in the way.”

“Yeah, take it easy.”

When Yoshino came carrying the tea to the table, he saw the bag was open and stuffed with strawberry daifuku. The soft bag made his heart dance with joy.

“Itadakimaaaas! Mm! They really are good!”

The strawberries and the sweet red bean paste were superb, and the springy texture of the gyūhi was out of this world. His mouth stuffed with daifuku, Yoshino chewed happiness and suddenly remembered an unsolved problem.

...But that's not something to discuss over tea now is it?

Yanase had confessed to him. Yoshino had put off the matter, but eventually he had to give an answer.

He had resolved the matter with Hatori, now he had to resolve this matter as well.

“...Say, Yuu.”

“Hm?”

“About my answer...”

“Ohh, have you thought about it?”

Although right now he was replying to Yanase's confession, Yanase's face remained unchanged. He didn't know whether Yanase was indeed calm or only pretending, so it kind of threw him off.

“Sorry, but I really do only think of you as a friend, Yuu.”

“I figured.”

“B- but, it's true that I think of you as an important friend! If possible, I want to

still be friends with you, Yuu. ...That's probably a selfish thing to say, though.”

“I'm happy you say that. I want to be friends with you forever, too, Chiaki.”

“Yuu...!”

Yanase's kind words touched his heart.

“I like your honesty. Besides, if I were to become a better man, there might be a chance of you falling in love with me, right?”

“Yeah, probably.”

The moment Yoshino said that without thinking too deeply about it, his eyes met Hatori's, who was standing on the other side of the sliding glass door.

Again?!...Why does he have such bad timing!? Or rather, am I the one with bad timing!?

Yoshino's eyes shifted back and forth as he gave a painful excuse to Hatori who came into the room with a deep furrow between his eyebrows.

“No! How to say this... It's not what you think, I was just cheering Yuu on...!!”

“What do I think?”

“Well, I mean...”

In this awkward atmosphere, Yanase took the opportunity to put in a word.

“That reminds me – Chiaki, you wanted to know if I'm a seme or a uke, right?”

Yanase rested his chin in his hand, giving Yoshino a flirty look, and Yoshino wondered why Yanase picked now to ask that, but nodded anyway.

“Eh? Ye- yeah.”

“I'll tell you. I want to do you, Chiaki, from your head down to your toes.”

“.....Hah?”

“In other words, I'm a seme. Let me tell you something else – I'm good.”

Hatori's lip twitched some more when Yanase announced that with a suggestive smile on his face.

“Yanase... didn't you plan on going to Satou-sensei's place?”

“Satou is late with the manuscript, so there's no one there tonight. Don't *you* have work?”

“Coming *here* is my work.”

As sparks flew between them, Yoshino tried to slip away, but sharp-eyed Hatori

saw him getting up.

“Yoshino. We have some talking to do later.”

“O- okay.”

The words Hatori said without even looking at him held irritation and anger. Now, until Hatori wasn't angry anymore, Yoshino would have to continue living off instant food. Yoshino silently cursed himself for saying such a stupid thing as he desperately stuffed his mouth with strawberry daifuku.